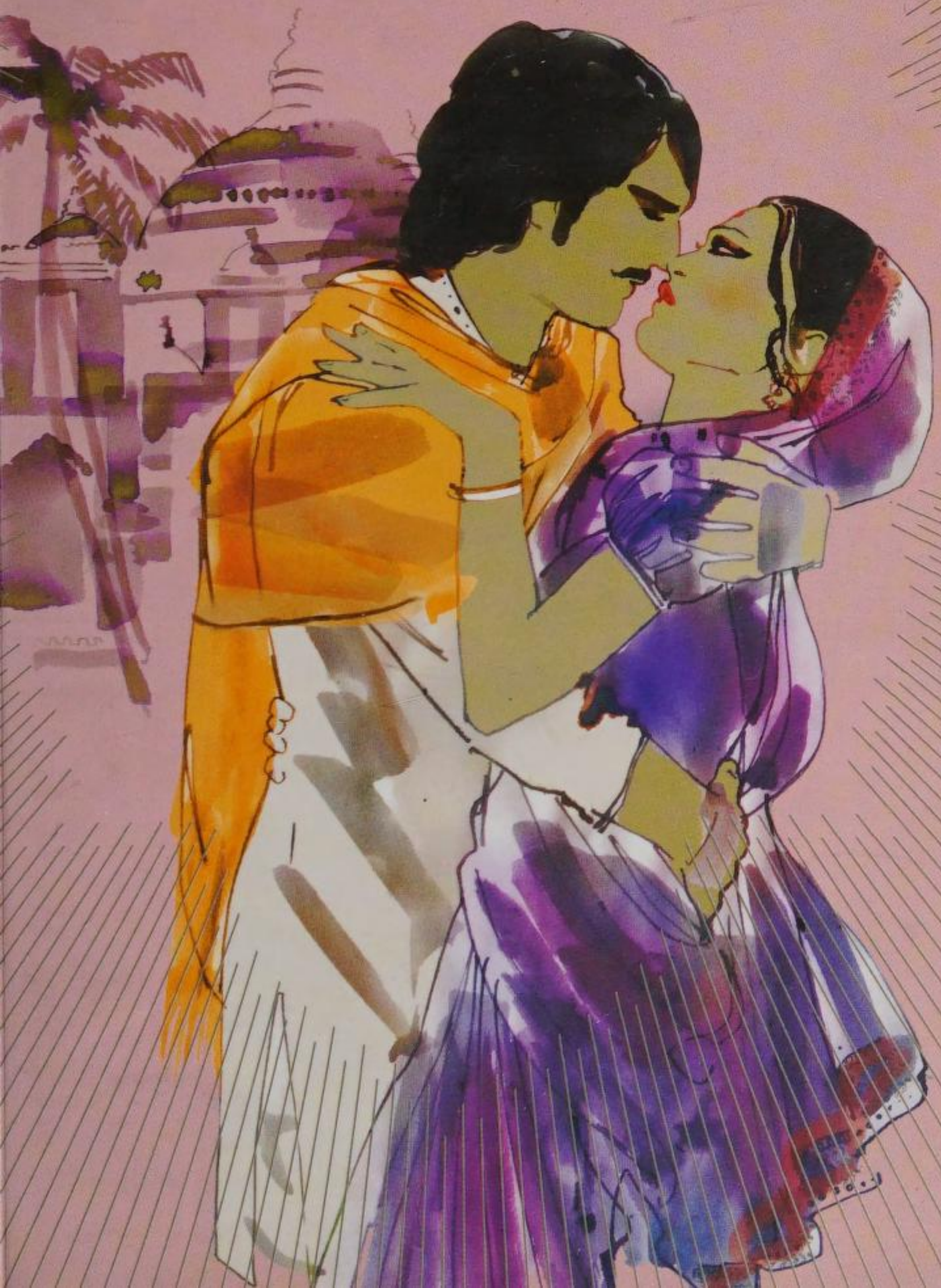
Kama Kahani

THE ZAMINDAR'S FORBIDDEN LOVE

JASMINE SAIGAL



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Jasmine Saigal

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For Toto and Felix

PROLOGUE

AS THE CARRIAGE ROLLED over the red dirt of Radhanagar, past the banana trees that loomed over the village, the Amarbati lake that rippled along the northern edge of the village, the Devi temple, the fields of mustard that dusted a yellow hue on to the horizon, Madhu looked out to a view she'd known all her childhood but a world she had never seen quite this way before. She had been born and raised here, in Radhanagar, in the Bardhaman district of Bengal, where she lived with her father, Chandan Lal, an esteemed scholar. Her mother had passed away when she was just a little girl and she was raised with the help of her grandmother. But last year, she too had succumbed to old age and now Madhu and her father lived alone. During the day, Chandan Lal would travel to nearby zamindars' houses to tutor their sons. Madhu would remain at home, tending to the domestic duties.

She would start her mornings early, when the sun was not quite yet ready to make its appearance, when the hens were still waiting to sound their morning call and the birds, anticipating daylight, shifted impatiently on the banyan trees. She would make tea and bring it to her father, who would be returning from his bath

in the lake. He would hold the metal glass with both hands, soaking in the warmth of the freshly brewed tea that his daughter had lovingly made for him, relishing it sip by sip, knowing no tea could taste as sweet. Then, he'd be off for his various lessons. Some days it was to Krishnaganj, some days further away to Jaldha.

Madhu would first sweep the house and then go to the lake to wash their clothes. In the afternoon, just before her father returned, she would start boiling the lentils and the rice. Chandan would bring home a selection of greens, sometimes with fish if there had been a good catch made by the local fishermen, or sometimes with eggplants or other vegetables, whatever was freshly available that day. Madhu would wash them clean, cutting them carefully into small pieces. She would fry the fish in ginger paste and make a stew out of it, just as her grandmother had taught her. She would then bring some fresh tea for her father, who would let out a sigh of contentment at being back. 'Aah, it's been a rough day,' he would say, leaning back and letting go of all the burdens of the day, as his daughter dutifully sat at his feet, gently swaying the fan.

'Why is that?' she would ask, looking up at him, anxious to hear all his stories.

'How can I teach two idiots who can't even memorize the names of the five Pandavas? I don't know what Raja-babu thinks his two sons will achieve from all this tuition. You can't teach a goat to become a scientist.'

'I can tell them! I know the names of the Pandavas!' Madhu would cry, excitedly.

'I know you can, precious. Your intelligence surpasses half the Bardhaman district's.'

'Perhaps, Father, one day I can be the first woman from this village to go to Calcutta to join university.'

Chandan Lal laughed. That was his dream too. But it was just that—a dream. He would never have the finances to cover such an expense. And besides, Madhu was a simple village girl. Her future was tied to Radhanagar and to Bidyut—the son of his close friend from Neelgar, a neighbouring village, whom Madhu had been betrothed to since her birth. The understanding was that they would wait till she turned eighteen. Madhu too knew that she was already bequeathed to someone, although they had never met. She felt secure in knowing that her future had already been planned and that her father felt comfort in knowing that he had completed all the necessary arrangements for his daughter, in case something should happen to him. But Chandan was a scholar—he read all day and often lived through his books. Like him, his daughter too, lived vicariously through her imagination. And although both of them knew, deep inside, that her path was already determined, father and child saw no harm in innocent dreaming, in concocting an alternate life.

But today was no ordinary day. Today, there was no childish role-playing either. Today, she was actually travelling with her father to Panchkula, a town slightly north of where they lived. There, her father

tutored the son of Gopaldas Mallick, an illustrious brahmin zamindar. Her father did not often take her with him when he visited his students. It was not a girl's place to be loitering around with her father on errands. But ever since his wife had died, Chandan Lal couldn't resist indulging his daughter. That day, Madhu had looked at him with her large, pleading, twelve-year-old eyes and he had not been able to refuse.

Chandan Lal was not inherently a part of the wealthy milieu of Bengal, but he was an established scholar, having spent a considerable part of his youth in Calcutta, editing a literary monthly, spending countless hours with fellow intellectuals and thinkers of the late nineteenth century, later engaging in a brief teaching stint at a university, before marriage and domesticity called him back to his hometown of Radhanagar. His experience, education, and knowledge earned him a certain social status and respect amongst the upper class and not only did he tutor their sons, but was often invited to an evening discussion which sometimes included Haridas Mukherjee, the district magistrate, perhaps a bottle of English liquor, and a hookah being passed around. Often, the zamindars' wives would gift him an old sari for Madhu or a pair of bangles that they had no longer any use for. He would return home with these tucked carefully amongst his books and papers. He wore simple garments himself—a pure white dhoti and a cotton kurta; in the winter, he brought out his burgundy shawl that had been a wedding gift

from his wife's parents. But for Madhu, he would get the best things possible—an English doll through a colleague in Calcutta who knew some sahebs; a new puff-sleeved blouse in the latest British fashion; the sweetest mangoes of that season. She was not just his daughter but also the son he'd always wanted, and his faithful companion. He taught her everything he would teach his paying pupils—no text was beyond her reach. She could recite the Bhagavad Gita by heart and she could challenge any man in her mathematical skills. Ever since his wife had died when Madhu was just a young child, she had become his entire world and he brought the universe to her—what he knew, he would teach her and what he didn't, he would buy.

'My, this road is so long, it has no end!' Madhu marvelled as she stuck her neck out to look beyond the horizon.

'It goes all the way to Calcutta,' said her father.

'All the way to Calcutta? Really?' She was awed.

'Yes, the Muslims built it. Remember I taught you?' he quizzed.

'Oh yes, Sher Shah. Right, Father?' she asked. He smiled.

'When will we reach the zamindar's house?'

'House? It's no ordinary house, my precious. It's called Mani House. Just wait till you see it.'

Madhu had never seen a mansion or a palace before. She had only heard of it from the stories her father would tell her and she imagined magnificent kings and queens living in them. She dreamt of

saris dripping with embroidery and necks and wrists embellished with gold. In their laughter she heard the kind of bliss that only money could buy. Her large eyes widened at the thought of being acquainted, of coming face to face, with such glamour and nobility. She was half afraid the blinding magnificence of the mansion would just pull her into it forever; that it would be so large, she would lose her way and perhaps not find her father again. But she looked forward to exploring the inner chambers, the outer yards, and she couldn't wait to meet the zamindar himself. Just imagine, meeting a real zamindar! What would she even say to him? They were just simple villagers, even if her father was the most educated man in Bardhaman. Their home, although one of the larger structures in Radhanagar, was plain grey—there were no mouldings; their window grilles—just simple, straight lines.

Madhu wore her best sari—red cotton with small embroidery work all over the body, a hand-me-down from one of the zamindar wives. It may have been the previous owner's daily wear, but it held a special place in her wardrobe. Her hair which had not been combed properly was hastily gathered into a long braid that hung almost to her waist.

'Couldn't you have worn some jewellery?' her father asked, looking a bit worried now that they were approaching their destination. That entire day he couldn't wait to show off his Madhu, his pride and joy, to Gopaldas Mallick but the closer they got, the shabbier she seemed to look.

As the carriage finally came to a halt, Madhu leaped out of it, almost tumbling to the ground, in her haste.

'Careful,' her father cautioned. 'Collect yourself and try to behave properly for a change. This isn't home where you can chase the birds, you know.'

'Yes Father!' she said, obligingly, not wishing to let her father down in front of their wealthy hosts.

As she smoothed her sari down and looked up, she was mesmerized by what she saw. Before her stood a structure more magnificent than any palace from her father's stories. Mani House, named after Gopaldas Mallick's grandfather, was actually not one structure but four. Each building was named after the direction it faced. It was like a city in itself. Ten of their houses could have easily fit into this one and then some. The East House faced the Bhagirathi river, the West House faced the embankment, the North House, which accommodated the main quarters, was white, dazzling in the sun's light, sprawled luxuriously against the immaculate backdrop of a quintessential Bengali village—the flat, fertile lands, the coconut groves, little fish ponds, and bullocks crossing the gravel roads. A wide, carved staircase marked the main entrance into the North House. Windows reaching from the floor to the ceiling opened their shutters out into the world and pillars and arches lent the buildings a stunning grandeur.

The gardens of Mani House spread in acres on either side. A maze of hedges curved through the northern fringe, immaculately manicured and trimmed. A gardener tended carefully to the hibiscus

and rose bushes on the periphery as another watered the lawns. No one looked up to see them enter, no one said a word. Madhu started running up the stairs, towards the entrance, her father trying hastily to keep up.

'Madhu, stop, stop! What will they think? Wait for me!' he cried.

Her excitement could not be contained. It trickled out of her voice in silvery laughter that echoed through the clear blue skies. The birds fluttered into the air as her voice reached all the way up to the treetops, piercing the air.

As Chandan and Madhu approached the heavy, portentous door, studded with moulding and metal, it opened wide, a passageway into another life. A man appeared before them. 'Oh, Chandan-babu, you are a bit late today?' he said. 'Babu has been waiting for you.'

'Yes, I'm sorry. I had to bring my daughter with me, you see. She wasn't feeling too well.'

'Well, she looks pretty okay to me,' said the old man, investigating Madhu. 'But I'm sure Babu would like to meet her. Take her upstairs. He is waiting in the main room.'

As they walked through the courtyard, through another set of doors that opened up into the interior of the house, Madhu's wonderment unravelled as well. There were all sorts of doors leading this way and that, and she wondered where they all led. The main courtyard led them through another curving set of stairs that extended four feet wide. The smell

of fresh flowers and incense came floating through the air.

'Come with me, Madhu, and stop staring with your mouth wide open,' snapped her father. She obeyed, as she always did. She just hid her astonishment inside her, not buried, but just lightly covered by the appearance of civility and good manners.

Gopaldas Mallick was every bit as awe-inspiring as his residence. His immaculate clothing made of the finest yarn, specially ordered from the city; the upholstered throne-like chair that he sat on, elevating him on a pedestal; the hookah that rested on one side, the fumes gradually thinning out into the air; his thick black moustache and his large, double chin, made him look rather unapproachable. He wore a cream silk kurta, embroidered at the edges in gold. His silk dhoti hung in perfect folds and his thick Kashmiri shawl draped his shoulders like a king's.

'Aah, Chandan. You are finally here.'

'Yes sir, I'm sorry I got delayed. I would like you to meet my daughter, Madhubati.'

'Madhubati, is it? Come here, let me see you a bit more clearly.' He called her forward and Madhu came out of hiding from behind her father, slowly managing to find her courage, now that she had been directly addressed. She smiled hesitantly, her large eyes taking up most of the space on her thin face. Her limbs extended awkwardly from her body, still not having quite found the right fit.

'Is this whole house yours?' she asked, genuinely

curious and sceptical of the fact that any one person could inhabit such a large space.

The zamindar roared in laughter. 'Yes, yes, it's mine. It was my grandfather's before that. But today, it is yours as well. I would like you to make yourself at home. Would you like something to drink? You must be tired after all that travelling. You can relax in that small room over there while your father is giving his lessons.'

Madhu simply nodded, not knowing what was appropriate or inappropriate to say. She liked this man, she decided. He may look forbidding but his manner and intent were kind.

'Madhu, why don't you go outside and wait for me while we talk,' said her father.

'All right,' she said, relieved. Outside in the long balcony that stretched across all four corners of the second floor, there were three doors to the left. The first, slightly ajar, beckoned her to open it and she carefully pushed it open and walked in.

It was a library, empty of people, luring Madhu within. She took her surroundings in. There were wall-to-wall shelves lined with books—bound in leather, some in Bengali, some in Sanskrit and some even in English. She was proud to realize she could read in all three of those languages. In one corner of the library stood a large desk made of polished teak, facing a window that looked out into the garden below, where the gardeners were still at work. She could also see the Panchkula skyline in the horizon. There were two chairs in front of the desk and she

stood on one of them—as if that would make her see farther into the distance, all the way into Radhanagar. Madhu guessed this was where her father conducted his studies. On top of the desk was a stack of books, neatly arranged. She picked one of them up and flipped through it. 'Ramayana,' she muttered to herself. She absent-mindedly flipped a few pages, outlining the writing with her fingers as her lips formed the slokas that her eyes were cast over.

She couldn't imagine the plight of the poor boy who would have to endure three hours reciting the Ramayana with her father. She decided to do him a favour. She took all the books and hid them behind one of the bookcases. 'There!' she thought. 'Now they can learn something more fun.' Feeling satisfied with herself, she ran out of the room and into the next one with a new strength and boldness gained from hiding those books and not getting caught.

But no sooner did she plunge herself into the room, than her path was obstructed by a large body.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, dazed, as her head bumped into a strong, sturdy figure. Her eyes followed the torso up to meet a pair of amused eyes, staring down at her.

'Who are you?' the boy asked, looking curiously at her. She was a misfit in that mansion—in her simple sari, her unruly hair, her hasty footsteps that lacked the grace of a well-brought-up girl. He was much older than Madhu: almost like a man, but not quite there yet. Something was missing—maybe it was the moustache, she thought—all men had one.

'Madhu.'

'Madhu who?'

'Madhu, who's father is the teacher.'

The boy smirked. 'Well Madhu, who's father is the teacher, I don't think you should be running around here. You almost walked in on me changing clothes.'

Madhu blushed and looked down at her bare feet. They were filthy now, although a few hours ago, when they had left their house at Radhanagar, they were spotless and eager to meet the zamindar and step inside Mani House. Now they were shy and embarrassed and she tried hiding them beneath her sari.

'Why don't you go outside and play? Have you seen our grounds? There is a pond at the southern end. If you like, I can call Hari, the gardener and he can show you around,' said the boy.

'No, that is okay, I can find it myself,' Madhu mumbled.

'Oh Madhu, there you are,' said her father, emerging from his conversation with the zamindar. I see you've met Som, my student. Did you introduce yourself?'

'Yes, I did,' she replied.

'Som here is going to prepare for a very important exam. We have a lot of work to do. If you promise to be good, you can go outside to the lawns and stay there till we're done.'

No sooner did she realize she had full permission to escape than she ran out. Madhu was curious about her father's lessons but the darkness of the room and the lustre of the immaculate furniture was not

a strong temptation to spy on them. She almost felt sorry for the poor boy, who she imagined would be sitting and reciting poetry till the words were all garbled in his head. Surely she had better things to do outside, where the sky was the only limit that was imposed on her; where her mind could wander breathlessly from one imaginary tale to another. She walked through the maze of hedges, losing her way several times before she emerged on the other end. She walked along the fish pond and pretended she was the queen of the mansion, giving out orders to the fish, which were her staff, squirming under the iron fist of her authority and meandering across the water at her command. She walked around the gardens, touching the flowers, smelling them, and talking to them. Finally, when she was tired, she sat under the shade of a guava tree and leaned against its trunk, closing her eyes. She would stay there all day, in her own world she thought, as she closed her eyes.

'Madhuuu!' came a loud thundering voice through her dreams.

'Madhuuuu!'

She jerked her eyes open to find her father waiting impatiently under the tree, tapping his foot.

'Did you take Som's books?'

'What books, Father?'

'Don't "what books" me, young lady. His books were on top of the table and now they aren't and I can only think of one person who could possibly have laid a hand on them.'

'Why would I take his books?'

'Oh Madhu, if I knew the answer to that,' sighed Chandan.

'Well fine then, I did take his books but I'm not returning them,' she said obstinately.

'Oh, really? We'll see about that,' said Chandan, running towards her. Madhu, being younger and quicker, easily gave him the slip and they looked quite conspicuous running around the great lawn in a circle. Then Madhu, spotting a tree, quickly climbed onto the lowest branch, still too high for her father to reach. Finally, Chandan gave up, heaving and panting, trying to catch his breath. They were joined by Som, who now stood next to her father, exasperatedly looking at her, anxious that they were wasting precious time that could have been spent preparing more diligently for his exams.

'Madhu, give me my books before I come up there to get you.'

'No!'

'I need them, I have an important lesson today.'

'I'm also doing something important up here,' she argued.

They went back and forth like that for several minutes. Finally, Som started climbing up the tree. He climed onto the lowest branch and reached up to where Madhu was sitting and grabbed her.

'Got you, little brat!' he said triumphantly. 'Now what will it take for me to get my books back?'

'I'm not giving them back, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not,' she sang, defiantly.

'Master, can't you do something about your daughter?' Som despaired.

For an entire hour, Madhu made her father and Som wait around in the garden, while she sat obstinately, staring ahead and refusing to budge. Finally, she grew tired of playing games and realized she was hungry.

'Okay, I will give you your books but you have to do something for me in exchange. Will you climb way up there and get me that guava? See up there, on that branch?' said Madhu, pointing at one of the last pieces of fruit on the tree. It was much too high for her to reach and she assumed he wouldn't be able to either.

The boy stealthily climbed up and retrieved the fruit for her and she marvelled at his athleticism. Even Gopal, her friend at home, wouldn't have been able to climb up so high. But this boy not only accepted her challenge, he was victorious too.

'There!' he said, as he handed her the fruit she coveted. He wasn't in the least breathless, as if it was the easiest task in the world. Just then, as Madhu looked up at him, she was dazzled—his tall, sturdy frame; the confident half smile; the eyebrows that arched smugly over his oval face; his half-mocking eyes that stared into hers; he definitely didn't look like Gopal or any of the other boys from her village. To admit defeat to him would not be surrendering at all, she decided. She ran up to the study room and revealed the books where she had hidden them. She handed them over to him with one hand,

clutching the guava in the other. She would not be eating that fruit till the very last moment. She'd relish its delectable sweetness—perhaps on her way back home. She looked fearlessly at him with her arm outstretched.

'Truce,' she said.

'Truce,' said he.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MONSOONS THUNDERED UPON the village roads of Bengal, the sheets of rain splintering into tiny shards as they hit the ground and scattered in every direction. Everything was wet—the trees, the fences, the fields, and Som's carriage, as it slowly made its way back home to Panchkula. He was twenty-three now. His age showed through his thick, bushy eyebrows that cast a manly hardness over his face; through his tough hands that possessed the agility and deft of the youth who had once climbed trees effortlessly; through his strong, athletic legs that were used to walking long village trails with his workers. And his eyes were somewhat hardened now, seeing something new every day—a new village he had never been to before or a new problem that had arisen with the farmers. He had started taking over some of his father's responsibilities: leasing out the land, talking to the farmers, giving them more time to pay their taxes because the monsoons were late that year. In many ways, he wanted to be like his father—kind, yet strong and demanding of his tenants because the farmers needed a leader and one day, when his father could no longer fulfil the role, Som would be

the one they would look up to. But he also wanted to do more than his father or what a zamindar was expected to do. He wanted to create new rules and break old traditions. He was young, full of energy and hope.

'Babu,' they had said, smiling at him, when he listened patiently to the farmers' irrigation troubles, 'you are as kind to us as your father has been. May God bless you.'

'Not at all,' he had said. 'And if the new ditches are still not distributing water evenly, come and tell me. I will see what I can do. I don't promise anything but I give you my word, I will try. How is your wife Ramu? Is she feeling any better these days?'

'Yes Babu, she is doing much better, thank you for asking. She says had it not been for your kindness and generosity in lending us money for her medical needs, she would have surely died by now.'

'Tell them to get my carriage ready,' said Som, looking up at the sky. He would have loved to stay and talk longer but he had to get going. It was already late afternoon. The clouds had now begun to stir restlessly and he wanted to make his way back home lest he got stuck in the torrential showers.

'I will be back next week,' he said, as he hopped into his carriage, drawn by two sturdy horses, strong and muscular. But before he was halfway home the rain caught up with him. It rained so hard that it almost formed a glass wall ahead and the horses were too afraid to keep moving. Their gait slowed till they finally came to a complete standstill.

'What shall we do, Babu?' cried the driver, in despair.

'Where are we?' Som asked.

'Near Radhanagar, by the Devi temple.'

Suddenly Som remembered. Wasn't his old teacher from Radhanagar? Perhaps he was home and Som could take refuge in his house while the weather calmed down.

'Krishna,' he yelled out to the driver, through the pounding of the rain. 'Krishna, go and enquire where Chandan Lal, the teacher lives. Maybe we can take shelter with him.'

Krishna jumped down reluctantly from his driver's post and disappeared into the cloud of rain. Som sat back in the carriage, wondering what it would be like to meet his old Master again, the man who had taught him since he was just a little boy all the way till his twentieth year. In a way, his teacher had taught him more about life than his own father had, whom he rarely saw when growing up because he was always too busy. Master, however, was a patient man who had tolerated all his youthful antics. He would sit patiently while Som made paper airplanes out of assignments, saying, 'Som! Concentrate on your books, not on toys. Is that enough naughtiness for today, do you think? Can we get on with our lessons?'

Of course, when he was a bit older, it was exactly the reverse. Som couldn't bear to be separated from his books, wanting to read more than he was given, always ahead of his lessons and sometimes he would have to tap Master impatiently, 'Oh Master-babu, what

are you dreaming of? I bet you didn't even listen to the end of the poem I was just reciting.'

'Oh sorry, Som, my mind was elsewhere,' Chandan would say apologetically.

And it was—his mind was on his daughter Madhu, whom he had left behind at home; who would soon become a young woman. And her entry into maturity would also be her entry into a new life with her husband Bidyut and without her father. Chandan had been waiting for that time to arrive for years now. Waiting anxiously, partly in anticipation and partly in fear. While one half of him couldn't wait to see Madhu settle down with a fine husband and a family of her own, the other half couldn't bear to let his one and only daughter, his one and only family, go. And of course, then there was the issue of dowry. For eighteen years he had been carefully putting aside money for her dowry but specific terms had not yet been negotiated and he was worried he'd fall short.

'Oh what will I do when she is no longer here?' he would say to Nandu, a friend of his. 'Who will cook for me and take care of me the way she has all these years? I might even have to find a wife again.' He would laugh, although inside he would be silently shedding tears.

Krishna somehow managed to find the teacher's house and knocked urgently at the door. Chandan answered.

'Are you Chandan Lal, the village teacher?' asked Krishna.

'Yes, I am. Who is asking?' he replied.

'I have come from Somnath Mallick, son of Gopaldas Mallick, the zamindar of Panchkula.'

'Som? Why yes, how can I forget!' On learning that his old student was in the vicinity, stuck somewhere in the middle of a dirt road on the way back home, he was adamant that they take shelter in his house.

Krishna returned to Som and relayed the news. The two of them made their way to his old teacher's house. 'Leave my things in the carriage,' he ordered. 'We shouldn't have to stay here long. As soon as it stops raining and the road is clear, we can make our way back.'

When he saw his old teacher, he was overcome with joy and embraced him. 'Master, how are you? It has been a few years.' He said.

'Yes, yes it has Som. My...how you've grown in three years! You're a handsome man now,' said Chandan. 'Come, come inside, you are soaked. Why don't you go refresh yourself and then you can have something to eat.'

As his teacher took him to the spare room to dry off, Som noticed the trail of a woman's sari disappear behind a door. Just a swish of white that whispered in a hushed tone and then vanished...as if he had seen an apparition. He was puzzled. He knew his master didn't have a wife. 'I wonder who that could be,' he thought.

Even as he was washing up, he heard the most bewitching, silvery laughter outside. He quickly opened the door to see where it came from and again, all he saw was the end of a sari quickly disappearing

around a corner, this time quite sure it was not his eyes playing tricks on him. His teacher called him to eat something. 'You must be starving. We've had our lunch, but you must want something to eat. Come, sit.'

Som was ushered into a room and seated at a table, which had already been set for him. The kansha plate was pure and polished, just as he was used to in his own home and a pinch of salt and two green chillies waited in one corner. He realized then how famished he was. And then he saw her—the beautiful Madhu, entering with a bowl of rice, carefully balanced between her hands. Madhu too had become older. She was no longer the little girl of twelve he had met six years ago and he didn't recognize her. Her hips were fuller, her face rounder, her skin, a beautiful honey, and her eyes, large, dark, and sparkling with spirit. She wore a simple pale blue cotton sari that showed off her womanly figure, her silhouette blatantly visible beneath the sheerness of the material. Her hair, which was tied in a knot, had come undone, loosely hanging behind her and a white flower was tucked to one side. Her arms and neck were bare, with no jewellery or other unnecessary ornaments. Her radiance was natural and organic and she didn't need anything cosmetic like other women did. She smiled shyly at him as she served him rice, then some dal and vegetable curry. She too wouldn't have recognized the boy whose books she had hidden and refused to return had her father not warned her before he entered their house. He had been just a youthful boy

of seventeen when they had first met. Now, he was twenty-three, a man. He was taller, broader, his hair thick and combed back. His complexion was fair, his face rugged and manly. He had his sleeves rolled up and she noticed his arms—they looked strong and muscular, the arms of a man.

Their eyes met and just as they did, she quickly dropped her gaze and swiftly left the room. 'Who was that?' Som asked his teacher.

'Oh, that's my daughter Madhubati. You met her when she was just a little girl. I'm sure you don't remember her,' he replied.

Som immediately recalled the incident when an insolent little girl had hidden his books on the eve of an important exam. He remembered wanting to shake her in anger. Why was that wild child allowed to run around freely, without any supervision? He was annoyed that his Master had brought her along with him.

'I remember her, but then, how could I forget? She stole my books the day before my exams and refused to return them.' He laughed. 'But she looks nothing like that now,' said Som, mesmerized.

'Yes, well, she is eighteen now, a woman. Soon she will be married,' said Chandan, completely unaware that his daughter had had such an effect on his former student.

'And it has already been settled?' asked Som as he began to hungrily eat his food almost as if he had been starving for days. The food was uncomplicated compared to what he was accustomed to at home, as it

usually was in the villages. But he had no complaints. There was a certain perfection in the simplicity. The lentils immaculately cooked, the vegetables done just right, not too soft, not too hard.

'Yes, for some time now, to someone from Neelgar. Soon, she will be eighteen and we can start making preparations. And what about you, son? Why haven't you got a bride by your side yet?' asked Chandan.

'I'm in no hurry, I'm waiting for the perfect woman,' replied Som.

'Is there even such a thing?' his teacher wondered aloud. 'And even if there was, and even if you found her and got her, there is no guarantee that you will be able to keep her,' he said, shaking his head in regret.

'If I can just have her for a short time, even if it was temporary, that would be worth being alone for the remainder of my life,' said Som, asking for a second helping of food. Not so much because he was hungry but because he couldn't resist wanting to see his exquisite server once more.

Madhu came in again, slowly and carefully traversing the distance between them. She smiled coyly at him and again, her eyes danced around his for a brief moment as she quietly served him another helping.

'Did you cook this yourself?' asked Som, trying to strike up a conversation.

'Do you see anyone else around here that can cook?' she retorted, all her coyness vanishing in a split second.

Som was taken aback slightly by her boldness. Hints of that twelve-year-old brat obviously still lingered. He would have loved to say something back but genteel zamindari manners and respect for his old teacher prevented him from doing so and he had to bite his tongue into silence.

The rain softened into a rhythmic drizzle, and Chandan decided to step outside to assess the situation and see what could be done of Som's carriage. 'Madhu, stay here and see to Som till I return,' he said, walking out of the room. Madhu stayed back, standing slightly away from Som. If she got any closer, she feared he would hear her heart pounding madly and she didn't want him to see her vulnerable.

'I don't think the rain is going to let up any time soon and it is almost dark now,' she said suddenly, again changing back to the demure hostess she had initially been. 'Perhaps you should consider spending the night here.'

'Are you inviting me?' he asked teasingly, a little perplexed at her shift of moods.

'I'm sure my father would say the same thing,' she said defensively.

Som gazed at her, soaking in her long dark braid, her feminine curves, her full lips. Perhaps, staying back was wise in such weather, he thought.

'And you? What do you do when it rains like this?' he asked Madhu, trying once more to engage her in conversation.

'Oh, I sit and stare out at the rain, I sing, I sleep, I think. There is a lot of work to do as well because

I'm the only woman in this house,' she said. 'And when all my work is done, sometimes I take one of Father's books and read all afternoon. That is my favourite thing to do.'

'You read? It is unusual for a woman to enjoy reading, especially around these parts,' he mused, his eyes still fixed on her, making her feel terribly self-conscious now.

'You think only men read these days? Of course you think that. How typical! In Calcutta some women have even gone to college. My father taught me to read from a very young age,' she snapped, squirming under his gaze. Her breath came unevenly as she tried hard not to look at him, not knowing how she would react if she caught him surveying her again. He was handsome, no doubt, but more than that, he was almost animalistic. Just the way his eyes perused her up and down with an insolence and boldness; almost with a sense of ownership, as if truly believing he could have her if he wanted. She'd never felt that about any man before and she wasn't sure what to make of it. It was unnerving and she wasn't sure how to behave or respond to the unusually powerful effect this stranger was having on her.

She started clearing away the food once he was done. While she was doing so, her hand accidentally brushed against his, sending a shock wave through her entire body. Som must have felt it too because at that moment, he looked up at her. She quickly pulled herself together and left the room.

'I will be right back,' she said as she left.

'Take your time,' he replied. 'I'm not going anywhere, I'm in no hurry.'

When Madhu's father came back, he looked concerned. 'I'm afraid the rain isn't going to let up any time soon and it's almost nightfall. You had better just stay here.'

'I wouldn't want to impose on you,' said Som, politely, although deep inside he was elated at the prospect of staying back. Suddenly the villages of Bengal weren't just filled with the banality of work. He knew these parts had thrilling, hidden secrets, he just hadn't expected to find one today, here, in his old teacher's house.

'Absolutely not, we may not have a mansion like yours, but it is big enough for company. Please make yourself at home. I will tell Madhu to prepare the spare room for you.'

Madhu was almost annoyed at how light-hearted she felt at the thought of their accidental guest staying the night. She wasn't sure why she felt this way. It's not as if he was the first male she'd ever encountered. No, the village was full of her admirers as soon as she had come of age. Madhu was not unaccustomed to male attention. In fact, she was quite aware of her femininity and could feel their eyes on her as she walked by to get water from the lake, her sari trailing behind her and her wavy body of luscious hair swaying all the way up to her hips. So why was it now that she felt more self-aware than ever before? And that too in front of a complete stranger? She must shake off this illogical feeling somehow.

She went into the spare room to prepare the bed for Som. She took extra care in straightening out the sheets and placing a handful of jasmine flowers on the nightstand. She smiled to herself as the intoxicating perfume swirled through the room and eclipsed her. 'Oh this is ridiculous,' she thought angrily and told herself to stop it.

As she was walking out, she bumped right into Som, standing at the doorway. He was tall and she came up just about above his broad shoulders, feeling dwarfed by his height. She hadn't noticed it before when he was seated at the table. To brace herself from falling backwards, she put out her hands against his chest. It was hard, masculine, and pulsating gently. The thin kurta did little to provide an adequate barrier against the warmth of his flesh. Had he been standing there, watching her all this time? Observing her singing a ridiculous rhyme to herself that she remembered her grandmother humming? Embarrassed, she didn't know where to turn and he caught hold of her by the shoulders to steady her.

'I'm okay,' she said hastily as she collected herself and shrugged off his hands. She preferred to have minimal contact with him. Something about his touch—sure, assertive, yet gentle and kind, instinctively felt so right, and all the more illicit.

Madhu stepped back quickly. 'I've made your bed, you must be tired. If there is anything else you need, just call. I'll be two doors down from you.'

'That's reassuring to know,' he said softly, his eyes meeting hers and holding her gaze for a few seconds

before she peeled them away, desperately avoiding any sort of contact.

'I would love to see some of this village tomorrow, once the rain has stopped. Will you take me around?' he asked, hopefully.

'Sure,' she stammered, again annoyed at having lost control of her resilience and confidence. 'I will show you the Devi temple, it is the pride of Radhanagar.'

Som couldn't imagine that this was the impetuous girl he had met six years ago—the girl who had stolen his books and refused to give them back. That headstrong, impolite, menacing brat had now turned into an irresistible woman and he wasn't prepared for such a distraction. He was here on official business, sent by his father; it was his chance to prove to him that he was now old enough and capable of handing his own affairs. All these years, he had been carefully groomed and moulded to be who he was today. He was given the best education—private tutors, great scholars, access to rare books. He had accompanied his father on his various trips not only across their fiefdom where they met the farmers and workers, the smaller estate managers, and other administrators, but also to Calcutta, where they sat on the same table as British lieutenants and generals, eating with forks and knives, sipping whisky and smoking cigarettes. He couldn't forget all of that just at the sight of a pretty face.

The zamindari clan of Bardhaman went back several centuries, across several generations of Som's family. His ancestors could be traced back to the Khatri

clan that came from the Punjab, near Lahore. It was believed that Shova Mallick, who was travelling on a pilgrimage to Orissa, had fallen in love with the daughter of a large estate owner of the area—Bhakti Chandra—and settled permanently on the banks of the Bhagirathi, thereby planting the very first seeds of the Mallick zamindari which had presided over the area since the seventeenth century. He bought some land from other zamindars in addition to receiving part of his estate as dowry from his subsequent marriage to Bhakti Chandra's daughter. Shova Mallick's grandson, Shyam, expanded their estate by purchasing Bardhaman and adjoining areas from another zamindar of the area—Krishna Ray. Subsequently, in the late seventeenth century, Shyam Mallick's son, Ganesha, received a patent from the emperor Aurangzeb which officially recognized him as the zamindar of Bardhaman.

However, during the disorder and chaos of Aurangzeb's rule, largely due to a corrupt minister of his court, Akbar Khan, much of the Mallick zamindari was seized by him and most of the family were either killed or sent into exile. It is said that Ganesha's daughter Mayabati killed herself with Akbar Khan's dagger to avoid the disgrace of being molested by him. Only Ganesha's son Jaidip managed to escape and many years later, returned to repossess his family's land when Aurangzeb had learned of his minister's deeds and dismissed Akbar Khan. Jaidip was eventually given the title of 'Raja' which was then carried on by his successors.

When the East India Company acquired Bengal, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the revenue of Bardhaman came under the direct control of the British. The Nawab of Bengal lost all his land to the East India Company and the Mallick zamindari was once again under threat. Under a new treaty issued by the British, Loknath Mallick, the zamindar at that time, agreed to pay a fixed amount of annual revenue. But unable to meet the hefty demands of the British, Loknath defaulted on several payments, which led to the seizure of several areas of his estate. The unreasonable demands of the East India Company had put pressure on not just Loknath but all the zamindars of Bengal at that time. But by the eighteenth century, under the leadership and reforms led by Raja Gopalchand, the zamindars of Bengal once again began to prosper and now, the Mallick zamindari, which eventually came into the hands of Som's father, Gopaldas, flourished once again.

What Som would inherit wasn't just an estate; it was a heritage and a history that went all the way back to an era even before Aurangzeb. Although his family no longer bore the title of 'Raja', in all practicality, he was still nobility. His actions would not just affect his workers but would determine the history of a mighty zamindari clan of Bengal. His real duties and responsibilities were far greater than just the day-to-day tasks that he saw to at the moment. His real commitment was to preserve the Mallick name in history books. And this burden clawed at him and sometimes weighed him down. Yet, he was

proud to be the bearer of the flag, to be next in line, to be his father's son—the father that everyone respected and admired.

Som's mother, Kamala Debi came from another powerful zamindari family—the Rais. Her ancestors had settled in Baikunthpur, near Bardhaman. The union of the two families also signified an alliance that would be the largest in all of Bengal. Som stood to inherit not just his father's legacy but also his mother's. He didn't see his mother often these days. He mostly travelled with his father on business and when they were home, the women of the mansion usually remained in the North House, in the inner chambers, while during the day, Som would work with his father from the South House—looking through the account or reading a newly published book sent straight from Calcutta.

But these days, Som often had ideas different from his father's and frequently, they would find themselves butting heads and clashing in opinions. Gopaldas was an old-fashioned zamindar, he ruled with an iron fist. While he mostly gave out orders through his subordinates, rarely mingling with the lowest level of his workers in the hierarchical feudal system, Som, the modern man, believed in being more accessible. He preferred to travel more than his father; in fact, this trip had only taken place after several days of arguments with his father.

'I don't think the problem can be resolved in Kanjipur unless I go personally, Father,' he had said.

'Why can't you just send Aloknath? What good will it do if you go personally, huh?' Gopaldas had argued.

'I want to understand what their real issues are and messages tend to get lost when passed around from one person to another. How can I help them if I don't know the truth?'

'You young people and your truth. I think you're reading too many English books these days.'

Then there was the issue of education. Som believed that the villagers should also receive education just as he did, which he felt would not only benefit the villagers themselves but also affect their work in a positive manner.

'Think about it, Father, if we taught them the science behind farming, don't you think they could be better farmers?'

'Oh but Som, you are so naive, the more they know, the more they can hurt us with. If you want them to be better farmers, just teach them what it is you want them to do, and they will do it, just as they always do what they are told to.'

Som remained quiet because he was taught not to speak back to his father but silently, he was enraged. Gopaldas was perhaps a great landlord but in truth, he commanded respect because he was a Mallick. Even if he had made wrong decisions, he would have still maintained his stature. The poor villagers did not know any better than to revere the man to whom they were indebted for their land. He gained his respect through their blind faith in him. Som, however, disregarded his superiority over others as

a birthright and an inheritance. He sought esteem through his hard work, through changes and reforms, not because he was born into the right family.

But today, as he got ready for bed, as the day closed its blinds, taking rest from all of its chaos, Som forgot about his father, the zamindari, the farmers' water problems. Tonight, he only had Madhu on his mind—the enchanting, mesmerizing beauty who seemed to have paralysed him. Little had he known when he set out early that morning from Mani House in Panchkula that he was destined to meet this woman—the very same Madhu that he had met six years ago. Was this fate?

As Madhu stirred restlessly in her bed, tossing and turning, she couldn't sleep. There, in the room two doors down, was a stranger—someone she had barely known for a day. Yet, someone who had such a strong effect on her. It was instantaneous, almost as if it was destiny. But how could it be destiny? Her destiny had been tied to someone else since she was born, when her father had bequeathed her to his friend's son. She could not dishonour her father. He cared for her and it was his love that provided this absolute and certain security in the form of Bidyut, whom she would be married to soon, now that she had turned eighteen.

She had never met the man whom she was to marry. It wasn't important. What was important was that her father had chosen him for her. He would always want her best at heart and she had to implicitly trust that. And yet, today, all these thoughts that were so

constant in her before, were challenged by the mere entrance of Som into her life—by chance. But, was chance the same as destiny in disguise? Did fate not have a hand in both? Chance connotes a coincidence and something purely unintentional, destiny on the other hand is smothered in design and premeditation. What was her destiny then? The design that she was to marry Bidyut or the fate of having Som walk through her door that afternoon?

At some point, Madhu's mind finally rested and she fell into deep sleep, dreaming of her magnetic stranger. They were standing by the lily pond, in the middle of the night; only the moon shone on the two fateful lovers whose paths had so unexpectedly yet determinedly crossed. His hand caressed her face, his fingers—soft, yet sure and sturdy—knowing exactly what pattern it wanted to trace on her cheek, knowing that it wanted to linger by her ear, tickling her all the way down to the core. She stood transfixed, unable to respond physically, just the movement inside her that pulsated under his feathery touch.

She quivered in her sleep because the feeling was so real. He was there, not just in her dreams but in spirit—he was there, now tracing her jaw, his smooth fingers running from her chin down to her neck. He pulled her closer by the waist and she wrapped her arms around him, feeling his desire and fervour at the touch of her palms on his chest, on his back, around his neck. He was really there now, in front of her, she could feel him, the passion was so absolute that it couldn't be her imagination.

She no longer avoided his gaze but looked straight into his eyes. She was not afraid any more. And then, as his lips closed in on hers, the warmth spread all the way down her neck, her chest, her fingers, her stomach and into the very depth of her womanhood. He grazed her mouth with his, softly, gently, nibbling, kissing, at first lightly, exploring cautiously. But then more dauntlessly—his tongue tasted her lips, his mouth caressing hers, then capturing it completely, locked in intensity—lip to lip, head to head, finger to finger—they were one entity, united in their passion.

Madhu sat up in bed, sweating, panting, not knowing whether what she had dreamt had just happened. She slid a hand down her face, through her damp hair. She was shaking, not just in euphoria but also in fear, knowing that what she felt in her imagination was a foreboding message of reality. She could have just dismissed it as a dream, but there was a truth hiding in it, which she had to decipher. What could it mean to have such thoughts about someone she had just met? And what did it say about her future with someone else? Was she allowed to have such thoughts about someone else once she was married to Bidyut? Was it illicit to just imagine? Perplexed, she got out of bed and decided to step outside for a breath of fresh air.

The dank warmth of the day was now replaced by the cool serenity of the moonlight, which cast a silver shadow across the village. Everything was asleep—the birds, the horses, the villagers, her father, and even Som. She was alone with the humming of the fireflies

under the moon's shadow, quietly thinking secret thoughts that she never dared to encourage during the day. Somehow the darkness of the night gave her a boldness to imagine things that were forbidden. Yes, surely it was forbidden, for Som was her father's pupil and a zamindar's son. Besides, she was to marry someone else. She was just a simple teacher's daughter. She was not a brahmin; she did not come from a family of wealth, power, or influence. All she had was the prosperity of her books and the purity of her heart. What use was it to fantasize about something that was hopeless? Or perhaps, there was safety in fantasizing about something that she was sure would never happen. Perhaps it was just innocent dreams and every girl needed those. Her future was fixed; it was carved out in stone. And these harmless dreams were like small detours through tiny little village paths on a long, pre-planned journey, marching diligently along the main thoroughfare.

The blades of grass rippled impatiently in the wind as she hugged herself and inhaled the sweet smell of the rajnigandhas that stirred something within her heart. As the rustling of the leaves seemed to get louder, Madhu was suddenly aware that she was not the only one awake. She felt another presence close by. It was the way the grass shifted. The tranquil air now began to heave under the tense breathing that she could feel rising up and down behind her. The silence of the night now began to gently fluctuate in anticipation of something unknown. She didn't even have to turn back, she knew he was there.

Som too was having trouble sleeping that night. Knowing Madhu was nearby, feeling her presence a few chambers away, it was impossible to turn off all his senses, now intoxicated in his very obvious infatuation with her. Yes, that's what it was—an infatuation. It had to be. It was normal for a zamindar to have his mistresses outside of the home and he wasn't even married. Surely, there was no harm in casual flirtation. Not everything had to mean something.

He lay awake in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, drifting in and out of his thoughts when he heard a door creak. Getting up from his bed and going over to the window, he saw Madhu softly treading the night, into the meadows outside. Quickly putting on some clothes, he followed her, at a distance.

He dared not let her know of his presence, he dared not make himself visible. He just stood some feet behind, observing this lovely woman, the way her head moved, the way her fingers parted the bushes, the way they toyed with the end of her sari, with the uncertainty of a young girl. He took a few steps forward but no—he couldn't, he wouldn't dare—not in his teacher's house, not to a woman whose marriage had already been arranged.

Madhu couldn't take it any more. She had paused and waited; under the pale moonlight, just as in her dream. She waited for it to unravel just the way she had seen it in her sleep a few moments ago. She waited for him to approach. But when what seemed like several minutes went by and he still didn't come any closer, she turned around, expecting him to be

right there, right behind her, expecting to be caught in his arms. But no one was there. It was just still, empty air, a vacant space that existed between her and the house; a vacuum that sucked away all her romantic thoughts, the sensual tingling in her arms and the flippant dancing night wind, which whispered secretively in the space between.

CHAPTER TWO

MADHU WOKE EARLY THE next morning. She couldn't sleep much that night anyway. When she went back to bed, her heart was beating so loudly, she was sure it would wake her father up. It was the beating of excitement as well as nervousness; of knowing that something was imminent, yet the dread that nothing may ever happen. She couldn't think, she didn't want to think. She couldn't tell the difference between being awake and asleep any more—the line between dreams and reality was blurred. It almost didn't even seem to matter because the feeling was so real and only feelings mattered, they never lied. The jittery sensation within left her tossing and turning in her bed and a few times she sat up, trying to strain her ears to listen through the static air in case she heard any resonance of life coming through the walls—to remind her that the mesmeric visitor who slept only two doors down was truly there; that it wasn't just her imagination. Of course, she couldn't hear a sound, other than that of the crickets and the insects outside, that buzzed through the slumbering air, the noise trickling in through the windows left ajar. But she imagined he was right next door, on the other

side of the wall, wondering what he looked like as he slept. He was so close, sharing the same roof, yet the distance between them seemed immeasurable.

With the very first hint of daybreak, when the sounds of the birds began to echo softly and slowly through the tranquillity of Radhanagar, when the dark skies began to gradually fade into a pale orange, Madhu got up and quietly tiptoed out of her room. She decided she would go for a dip in the lake before the rest of the house woke up. As she walked past Som's room, she paused, she wasn't sure why. Perhaps just to make sure that he was still there. She rested her palms on the door and leaned her ear close to it. Perhaps she half hoped he would sense her presence and emerge from the room. But before she did anything more foolish or before he really did wake up, she quickly left. What did she really think would happen? she wondered. And what would she do even if it did?

The sun was now beginning to peep through the veil of darkness, and the skies had a soft, golden glow that spread its warmth across the village. Madhu made her way to the lake, the gentle morning soothing her restlessness. Making sure no one was around, Madhu took off her sari, folded it and placing it beneath a bush, immersed herself into the crystal-clear water. It felt cool, soothing and sensuous against her bare skin, tickling her senses as each of her body parts merged into it—her small feet, her tiny ankles, her calves, feminine yet strong, never having shied away from walking in the fields or running errands; her

curving hips, her petite waist, her breasts, now full of a grown woman's ripeness. She leaned her head back so her hair too soaked in the moistness that now covered her entirely. She tasted it on her lips, in each bud of her tongue. She closed her eyes and absorbed the smell of the flowers, the scent of the fields that blew in through the wind. The coolness of the water now mingled with the warmth of the sun and wrapped around her body. This was her time, her few glorious moments with herself before the demands of the rest of the day would draw her back to reality: cooking the day's meals, chopping the vegetables, wiping droplets of sweat in front of the fire, wishing she could be outdoors instead.

Som too couldn't sleep much longer today. He felt anxious as he got out of bed. He should have been home the night before; no word had been sent to his family. There was work to be done, matters to discuss with his father. But somehow all of that seemed trivial at the moment. He hoped Madhu hadn't seen him the night before, watching her. It was still early, she and her father must still be asleep and he decided he would go out for a walk before the rest of the house woke up. It would be interesting to see Radhanagar in the early hours, unaware, unprepared, and in her essence. He quietly threw open the doors of his bedroom and stepped out into the courtyard—soft, yet energetic sunshine greeting him and beckoning him even further out. He yawned lazily and stretched out his arms, embracing the morning air as he set off towards the lake. A cold splash was exactly what he

needed. But as he approached the water, he noticed someone already in there—a woman. Coming closer, his heartbeat faltered as he realized it was not just any woman, but Madhu.

There she was, uninhibitedly wading the waters, which came up just above her breasts. Her uncovered shoulders, barely grazing the surface, hinted at what followed beneath it. As the water played along her chest, he could make out the deep line of her cleavage, imagining her naked body beneath—her perfectly round, firm breasts, his hands wrapped over them, claiming them as his own—and almost blushed at the pleasure it gave him to do so. He could easily stand right there, hiding behind the tree that shielded him from her direct line of vision. But he felt guilty. No, he was a gentleman. Sadly, his scruples always came in the way.

He began to turn and walk away when he heard a shuffling sound nearby: it was a dog, running away past him with Madhu's sari. The animal had escaped with her clothing, and was now happily sitting beneath the shade of a coconut tree, chewing through the material. Som cautiously approached the dog and threw a stick in its direction. It sprang up in fright, dropped the sari and ran off. After the animal was well out of sight, he walked over and picked up the sari. It smelled of her—the soft fragrance of the flowers that she had worn in her hair the night before still lingered. He smiled to himself as he placed the sari on the lowest branch of a nearby tree, away from the reach of any other menacing animals.

Madhu was completely enraptured in her ceremonious bath and had not noticed anything unusual happening on the periphery. But hearing a sudden shuffling, she turned back, alarmed. A tall figure was standing several feet away from the shore. At first she couldn't identify the silhouette, but then she realized that it was Som. He had obviously just woken up—his hair was still dishevelled, his kurta crushed. His face bore the masculine, raw appeal of a man half asleep.

'What are you doing here? Spying on me? How dare you?' cried Madhu.

'I just happened to be going for a walk, trying to take in the beautiful morning after the storm. I didn't know you were going to be here so early,' he said truthfully.

Madhu was embarrassed to be caught in such a compromising situation. She waited for him to apologize and turn away but when he made no movement whatsoever, she raised her voice, 'Well what are waiting for? Aren't you going to leave?'

'I was just enjoying the view,' he said, toying with her.

Madhu couldn't believe his arrogance. 'Leave at once, please!' she cried. How dare he? Who did he think he was?

'Sure, if that's what you want,' he grinned and began to walk away.

Suddenly Madhu let out a soft scream as she realized her sari was not where she had left it and then looking at Som, walking away so agreeably, she felt he must have a hand in its disappearance.

'Wait! Where are you going? You took my sari, didn't you?' she hollered.

'Your sari? Now why would I do something like that?' he said mockingly, tilting his head at her. She looked even more ravishing when angry.

'Don't lie to me, it was right there before you got here,' Madhu said accusingly, pointing at a large rock that lay between them. She couldn't fathom his audacity. What did he expect her to do? Come out of the water without any clothes on?

'Hmm, maybe a fox took off with it,' said Som, and once more turned around to walk away. 'I'll catch up with you at home,' he said.

'Wait, damn you, you can't leave me like this. I need my sari. Please!' Madhu was now desperate; looking around, hoping no one else was witnessing this. If word of this incident reached her father, she wouldn't know how to face him.

'Do you? Really?' he mocked her now. 'What will I get in return?'

'You're disgusting!' she retorted. 'You'd take advantage of me like that?'

'I had to climb a tree for you six years back when you hid my books. It's only fair you do something for me now,' Som teased. His eyebrows arched, his dark eyes stared unblinking and tauntingly at her.

Madhu blushed. She had forgotten about that incident. Besides, she had been only twelve and it had happened so many years ago. How could he be so childish?

'Well fine, what do you want?' she scoffed.

He thought for a bit, then grinned, raising an eyebrow and said, 'Well, let's just say you owe me.' His eyes pierced her nakedness and although she remained covered by the water and there was a safe distance between them, she had never felt more exposed and vulnerable. Her arms were defensively crossed over her breasts and her legs drawn rigidly towards each other for security. She was shaking now—in fury and in nervousness. This was hardly equivalent to stealing someone's books, she thought enraged. Som, having had his share of amusement for the morning, finally relented and retrieved her sari from behind the tree.

'I'll turn around while you get dressed,' he said, his voice still carrying a tone of humour that antagonized her.

'How kind of you,' she quipped.

She came out of the water, leaving a trail of wetness behind her and quickly draped the sari about herself. The material, now soaked in water, clung to her like a second skin. Pearl-like beads trickled down her long, damp hair. She stormed past Som, whose back was turned towards her, and began to march towards the house. He stood there, watching, staring at her figure that was so evident beneath the thin cloth. Her tiny waist, her smooth back, her round buttocks—he just stood there transfixed and riveted, admiring her shamelessly. Madhu, aware of his eyes on her, turned around and glared icily at him.

'Are you just going to stand there and keep on staring?' she demanded.

'I could just stand here looking all day, the scene

is breathtaking,' he replied grinning. His mischievous grin made him seem seventeen again. Seventeen, but in the body of a man, thought Madhu.

'I see you haven't changed much since you were a little girl,' he said. 'You were a brat then and you're just as insolent now,' said Som teasingly although he realized that was a lie. She was definitely not twelve any more.

'And I see that the years have robbed you of your senses,' Madhu replied.

'Robbed? No. I've just finally learned how to put up a good fight,' he said. 'Back then, I gave in too easily.'

They walked back together, across the oceanic meadow that separated Madhu's house from the lake—she, marching ahead while Som, following a few paces behind, unable to take his eyes off her. Madhu could feel them burning into her flesh and all she could think of was reaching the shelter of her room as soon as possible.

As they approached her house, she immediately ran inside to her own quarters. Drying herself off in her room, she quivered at the recollection of what had just transpired. Sure, she was furious at his behaviour but somewhere she also felt a perverse pleasure in knowing that he had been watching her. It forged an intimacy between them that was now unbreakable. He had seen her in a way no one had ever before. He he had seen her in an elemental way that had broken all boundaries of courtesy and customary politeness. They had crossed a barrier.

When she came out of her chambers, she was dressed more appropriately, carefully choosing a light cream sari, bordered in a deep, blood red. Her aunt had given it to her last year during the festivals and she knew it flattered her. The simplicity and uncomplicatedness of the pattern wouldn't expose her attempt at trying hard to impress him. Yet, the weave complimented her complexion and the minimalism accentuated her glamour instead of drawing attention to its craft.

Som found Chandan in the sitting room. 'Aah, there you are!' he said, as Som entered. 'I have some bad news for you. Your carriage unfortunately has got stuck in a deep pit. There was so much rain that the wheel sank deep inside the mud and it seems impossible to get it out. We have to wait till it completely dries up.'

'Is there no other way I can take a ride somehow? Another carriage? An ox cart?'

'Ox cart?' Chandan cried, aghast. 'Your father would never forgive me if I let you get on one. I only wish Radhanagar had a train station.'

Som laughed at the thought of his father's face on seeing him riding an ox cart. Yes, he would be livid. And yes, what was so urgent anyway when there was plenty here to keep him busy. He might as well take another day off. He would send Krishna back with word to the house, so they wouldn't be worried. If the carriage could not be fixed by tomorrow, his father would send another one. Meanwhile, there were other things to focus on.

'All right Master-babu, if you can tolerate me for

just one more day, I would love to be your guest tonight,' said Som, clapping his hands together.

'Wonderful! That's settled then. Madhuuu!' he called out. 'Oh Madhu, come here at once.'

Madhu was just finishing tying her hair. She combed it through carefully, making two braids and twisting them into an intricate bun. Then, taking another comb, she stuck it in the middle of the elaborate knot. She put on her special shoes—brown sandals with curled fronts that had a tiny bit of heel to give her a slight lift. They clicked along the floor as she walked, announcing her entrance and she felt glamorous in them. Her father had got her those last year from the city on one of his trips. She only wore them for special occasions as most women in the villages still walked barefoot and such a little detail would not only cause them envy, it would also be wasted on them. There! She would show Som that although she was from a small village, she could dress like the best of the zamindari and Calcutta women. Her dark hair shone in exuberance, as she looked at herself one last time in the mirror, pleased with what she saw. If only she had some kajal or shurma to apply to her eyes, she thought, wistfully.

'Oh Madhuuu,' came her father's voice across the house.

'Coming!' she cried, clicking her way through the balcony and into the room where Som was sitting with her father.

'It's almost nine, aren't we going to get some food?' Chandan asked accusingly. 'Oh and Som will

be staying with us one more night. Make sure you prepare something special today.'

Madhu didn't say anything, but just glanced up at Som and smiled. 'I'll bring in some tea and breakfast,' she said and walked away.

As she dutifully served them breakfast, all the while avoiding Som's gaze, both of them remained silent, the earlier incidents now casting an awkwardness between them. Chandan, completely unaware of the fragility of the situation kept talking to fill the pregnant silence. 'So, I was thinking,' he said, in between mouthfuls of food, 'why doesn't Madhu show you around the village? We don't have any grand architecture like Panchkula but our Kali temple is worth a visit.'

'I would love to see it,' replied Som, delighted at the thought of spending some legitimate time with Madhu and getting to know her better. 'Should we go after breakfast?'

'As you wish,' said Madhu, shyly, now tongue-tied in front of her father. She wasn't sure if she was happy or infuriated. It would mean spending half the day alone in his company and the very thought of it made her dizzy. After they were done with breakfast, Som waited till Madhu had cleared away the table and finished her work in the kitchen.

'So, are we ready?' he said. He was impatient.

'What would you like to see?' Madhu asked. Was she flirting with him? No, that intonation in her voice was surely his imagination. It was impossible to read a woman's mind, especially this one's, it seemed.

'Just show me Radhanagar through your eyes,' he said, his gaze now lingering on her softly and quietly, not with the penetrating desire it had earlier that morning.

'Radhanagar changes according to my moods—when I am content she is one way, when I am ecstatic or angry, she is another,' said Madhu playfully.

'And today? What is she to you today?' asked Som

'Let's find out,' said Madhu, smiling.

She first took him to see the Kali temple, where she would go with her father on special occasions. Legend had it that when Lord Shiva was dancing with Kali on his shoulders, in anger and ferocity, her body which had been cut into tiny bits by Vishnu was dispersed all over the country. Every spot that a part of her body touched then gave way to a place of pilgrimage. Supposedly, the Kali temple of Radhanagar was where her little finger had landed. During the Kali festival, devotees from all across Bengal would flock here to pay homage to the goddess. This temple wasn't ornate with magnificent carvings or sculptures. The structure itself was made of mud. It was small, the base square, painted cream with red trimmings. Several domes or towers in varying sizes decorated the top, the tips of which were also painted a terracotta red to match. In front of the temple was a small pond or dighi, in which worshippers could take a dip.

Madhu pointed at a cluster of five trees—a priest sat beneath them and several villagers gathered around him. 'That is Panchavati,' she said. 'The priest holds sermons there, every morning. On festivals such as

Kali Puja or Durga Puja, we sit around there and sing kirtan. The entire village gathers here on those days, even my father, who rarely visits the temple.'

Walking past the Panchavati, Madhu led Som to the interior of the temple. Inside was a simple, black statue of Kali—she didn't have silk clothes or glittering ornaments bedecking her form. Her jewellery and clothing were carved into the stone itself. But through the plainness of the temple, its faithful worshippers, the simplicity of the statue—in front of which an old woman now kneeled, palms joined, head bowed, whispering silent prayers that only the Goddess could hear—through the mellow, muttering chants of the priest coming from outside, there was a lucid and luminous spirituality that was cast around the area and Som could see why this was Radhanagar's sanctuary.

'That woman comes here every morning to pray. We call her Pishi, or aunt,' said Madhu.

'What's she praying for?' asked Som

'That her daughter finds a suitable boy soon, but she's been praying for a year now and I think her time is running out,' giggled Madhu.

'Does your father pray for you?' he asked.

'He's already found me a husband. Besides, he is too caught up in his books to worry about praying to God. He'd rather pray to the Bhagavad Gita.'

Som laughed, but felt strangely hollow inside as he remembered that Madhu was already promised to someone else. 'How does that make you feel? Knowing that your husband has already been picked?'

Madhu sighed. 'I have mixed feelings, to tell you the truth. On the one hand, I'm relieved for my father's sake because I know it's something that would've worried him. I'm glad I'm not a cause of concern to him. But yes, on the other hand, it's difficult to accept that I'm already claimed by someone else. Someone I've never even laid my eyes on. To think that soon I will be sharing the rest of my life with an unknown, a stranger. I have to become accustomed to his face, his habits. What if I don't even like him? But I trust my father implicitly and know that he'd choose only the best for me. I must have faith in his choice,' said Madhu. 'And you? No one for you yet?'

'No, not yet, but I'll know as soon as I see her,' he said, looking directly at her. 'Till then, I'm perfectly content with being single and leading a bachelor's life. And you? You're ready to marry?' he asked.

'I don't think I have a choice. I think it's been decided for me. I must accept my fate. What else would I do? I can't be a burden on my father for the rest of my life.'

'You always have a choice. It's your life,' said Som.

Madhu laughed. 'You speak like an Englishman. That's not what a good Hindu would say.'

'Maybe I do, but I don't believe in blindly following tradition for tradition's sake. We must stop and ask ourselves why we do what we do. Look, I'm proud to be Indian but we must also question everything that we take for granted. I believe in change. I believe in doing things differently.'

If Madhu were to be honest, the thought of marrying Bidyut petrified her. To share the rest of

her life, her thoughts, her feelings, her bed—what if he was completely unlike her? What if he never talked to her, never listened to her the way Som did? What if he thought books to be a wasteful pastime? Yet once again, she had to remind herself to trust her father.

They left the temple and made their way along the never-ending narrow red brick path that seemed to merge right into the horizon up ahead. They walked together through the farmlands, the mustard fields, the plantains, zigzagging through the rice paddies that were laid out in a gridlock. The air was warm and humid and sparrows were cooing gently in the lull of a quiet morning. Side by side with the most exquisite woman he had laid eyes on, Som was mesmerized.

They walked past a mango tree, heavy with unripe fruit. 'You want one?' asked Madhu, her eyes lighting up in childish enthusiasm. 'Wait! I'll get it for you,' and having said that, before Som could stop her, she jumped up as high as her small frame would allow, to a low-hanging branch and with a swing of her hand, knocked a fruit off it. 'Here,' she said, handing it to him. 'It's unripe, so it's very sour, but to me, that's when it tastes the best.'

'I've been in these parts so many times before but I've never quite seen it like this,' he marvelled.

'I suppose it depends on whose eyes you see things through,' said Madhu.

Madhu's eyes were large, dark, shaped like a boat and they swayed with the buoyancy of her moods. They were larger when she was angry; dancing wildly

like a ship being tossed around in stormy seas. Those were the eyes of Kali, thought Som, when he had hidden her sari. And then, when he gave her clothes back, they were softer, quieter, easily appeased—just a gentle sail that floated through serene, calm waters. But right then, they were exuberant and danced in the joys of showing Radhanagar to him. They held the excitement of a child: the uncomplicated purity of innocence.

As they came upon a narrow body of water, they had to step over some stones to cross to the other side. 'If you were truly influenced by the Europeans,' giggled Madhu, 'you would throw down your cape for me right now.'

'Well, I don't have a cape but so I'll just have to do this instead,' said Som and he swiftly lifted Madhu in his arms and gently carried her on to the other side. Madhu didn't know what hit her as he grabbed her with his strong arms. Instinctively her hands rested on his shoulders and she almost winced in shock at the contact. She could have sworn that when he put her down, his arms lingered a little longer than necessary on her back. Or perhaps, that was just her imagination. Maybe she was just dreaming things although she was certain she could feel the hot marks of his fingers that carved their tracks deep into her skin.

She stood in a sort of trance for a few seconds, trying to make sense of what exactly had happened when Som looked at her suggestively and motioned with his head. He seemed to raise his eyebrows—

questioning her, waiting for her response. Her heart almost skipped a beat and she wasn't sure if she felt nervous, afraid, or elated. What was he trying to ask or say? He just stared at her intently and she tried to read into it. Was it something so unspeakable that he had to speak in gestures—in a language that only the two of them understood? Could he possibly be thinking the same thoughts as she? Did he want something from her?

'Madhu?' he said, waking her from her reverie. 'Shall we go home? It's getting late.'

'Oh, what? Yes, of course,' she said, floating back into reality, clearly embarrassed. He had just been motioning her to move on but she had read something completely different into his gestures and took it for some other kind of invitation. Oh this had gone much too far, she thought. What had happened earlier that morning, when she was taking a dip, was just an accident. She had to remember that. And the way he looked at her, any man would look at any woman that way, when caught in a compromising position. She must not read anything more into it. Once again, silently reprimanding herself for nurturing such foolish thoughts in her head, Madhu decided to be real once more.

They walked on in silence, Madhu playing with the end of her sari, fidgeting with her fingers. Everything seemed so uncomfortable to her right then and every step she took was smeared in self-consciousness.

Som was disturbed. This was no accident. His carriage breaking down right near Radhanagar,

finding his old Master, meeting Madhu—it was not by chance. Nothing happens without a reason and he felt compelled to find out the meaning behind this occurrence. He couldn't simply stand there and let the moment just go by without seizing his opportunity. It felt so intrinsically right between them and he couldn't explain it.

'You're unusually quiet,' said Som. 'This is the first time in the last few hours that you've been speechless. What is the matter?'

'Nothing. Why would you say that?' asked Madhu.

'You have a lot on your mind?' asked Som

'No, just this and that,' she said obstinately.

Som suddenly stepped closer to bridge the gap between them. He looked boldly at her, which alarmed her. 'I can't pretend any more,' he said huskily.

'What do you mean?' said Madhu, her voice faltering in nervousness. She quivered from the tip of her throat all the way down to the end of her toes—a thrilling, panicky feeling now overcoming her.

He now stood merely a few inches away from her and before she could say anything else, he cupped her face with one of his hands as the other pulled her close to him. Instinctively, her arms wrapped themselves around him. Their bodies were now closely entwined and she could feel the heat rising as it encircled her, making her feel giddy and intoxicated with passion.

Almost in slow motion, his face came closer to hers, bending down, his nose brushed against her

cheeks as his lips closed over hers. The warmth now prickled all over her and she gripped onto him so as not to lose her balance. At first he was gentle, almost teasing, caressing her lower lip, nibbling it, tasting it, then her upper one, circling his tongue over its shape, exploring it. He breathed deeply, pulling her even closer and as he did so, he pressed his mouth harshly over hers, claiming it completely. His tongue trailed the inner corners of her mouth and then gently coaxed it open. As it explored inside her, she could taste him now—his salty lips over hers, his warm, moistness mingling with her own and she gave in completely, falling almost limp in his embrace.

Her hands traced the outline of his strong muscular arms, exploring his form, his shape, his taut back, then encircling themselves around his neck and digging into his hair as he breathed into the crevice of her neck, speckling it with tiny kisses. She arched her neck back in delirium as he traced her lines all the way down to the bottom of her throat; a guilty smile curved the corners of her mouth. He moved her sari, which covered her, to expose her pulsating chest as his mouth found the beginning of her cleavage through the low neckline of her blouse and his tongue slid down between. Madhu gasped. 'Oh Som,' she cried, trying to push him away. 'We shouldn't...' she tried to say more but her voice trembled with the rest of her body and she lost track of all thought. This was sin but it felt so right and she was torn between duty and desire.

'Yes, we should,' said Som. 'There's no point in trying to fight this any more.'

Perhaps he was right. They had been trying desperately to avoid exactly this ever since their first meeting. Her yearning was so strong that he had crept into her dreams. But this was not a dream any more. This was real, even more exhilarating than her fantasies could ever hope to be. No man had ever touched her, had ever caressed her. She couldn't imagine anyone else evoking such passionate feelings within her. She couldn't imagine being with another—another set of arms encircling her waist as Som's were right then, tracing her back and cradling her body into his. As one arm still locked her in, the other now began to explore to her front, gradually making its way down as it caressed her breasts through her blouse. Her nipples hardened under his touch—all the blood rushing away from her head into the perkiness of her dark mounds, making her feel light headed. His tongue still explored her mouth, as she now began to hungrily kiss him back—and they remained locked in their fervour—mouth to mouth, body to body.

Som looked up finally, kissing her eyelids tenderly. Madhu remained speechless, smiling slightly up at him as her body still clung on to his. Looking straight into her eyes, which were now shining brilliantly—glowing in a new-found longing that they had never seen or felt before, he murmured quietly as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ears: '*And all that's best of dark and bright, Meet in her aspect and her eyes.*'

Madhu felt flattered and blushed. Suddenly the reality of being in Som's arms, in the arms of a

zamindar's son, someone who should be far beyond her reach, romancing high society women or even British ladies, someone spouting Lord Byron's poetry to her, seemed almost surreal.

'One would think you've never seen a woman before, the way you are gushing Byron.'

'Not like you, I haven't,' he whispered.

She could have stayed there in the fields all day, wrapped in his arms and smothered in his kisses but her senses finally, albeit reluctantly, regained their hold. That moment, although theirs completely, was now over. What they shared was special, illicit; it would be her very own secret that she would carry to her grave. But that was all it could ever be. There was no point encouraging something that had no future. For, Madhu had to remind herself one more time, her future was already chosen. And Som—he would go back to his zamindari house, resume his rightful role in his own world in which she'd never fit. His parents would introduce him to young girls—other zamindar's daughters. And soon, he would marry one of them. There was no point living in a daydream and reciting love poems that had no real meaning in their present context. Romance was something one just read about in books.

'We should go,' she said, her voice worried as she looked around them anxiously, hoping no one had seen. 'Come, I'll take you to Father's school on our way back home.'

Chandan Lal had started the first school in Radhanagar. It was located close to his house—a

one-room structure, made possible by funds donated by the zamindar himself. When it had first opened its doors a few years ago, Chandan had only four students. Now, almost every son from every household attended his Vidya Bhavan. The school was modest—there were no desks or chairs. The boys all sat on the floor, even in the middle of December when the cold pierced their skinny, bare legs. They would sit there, shivering, rocking back and forth to generate warmth while trying to focus on the blackboard, the only piece of furniture the room possessed.

As Madhu and Som peeked into the school, Chandan, who was in the middle of his morning lessons, was delighted. 'Aah, Som! I'm so glad you've come to see our school. Please, please, come in.' Som entered the room and as he did so, the students, ranging in age from five to ten, all got up and greeted him in politeness. 'We have few modern amenities here, as you can see, but we are modern in our studies and in our way of thinking.'

'I hope Madhu is taking good care of you,' Chandan added.

'Oh yes, absolutely,' said Som, smiling to himself.

'Wonderful! Then I will see you later at home, for dinner,' said Chandan.

Som stepped out of the school to find Madhu waiting for him outside. 'What did you think?' she asked.

'It's amazing that your father has been able to do this for all these children,' he remarked.

'Yes, this has really been a dream of his—to provide education to everyone in Radhanagar. You see that boy Noni over there? His father can't afford the fees, which are quite nominal as it is. But Father still insists that he come,' said Madhu.

Some of the earlier tension between the two had now dispersed as they made their way back to the house. As he walked by the school, the fields, passing villagers on their way to the market or the pond to fetch clean water, Som noticed a sense of contentment on everyone's face.

Radhanagar to him seemed truly a paradise where everything that graced the village seemed touched by beauty. Everything spelled happiness to him that day—the farmers cutting their crop; the bulbuls echoing through the air; happiness was those little boys sitting on the hard floor of their school, memorizing mathematics; that old woman praying to Kali for her daughter; happiness was Madhu's eyes dancing; her smile that formed two parentheses at the edges of her mouth.

When they approached the house, Madhu said, 'I have work to do,' and excused herself. Som wandered about the house, flipping through his master's books, trying to find a suitable read to pass the rest of the day. There were piles of Bankim Chandra but he had already read most of those. There were some English books, some Shakespeare, some poetry, but he had read most of them through their lessons as well. Exhausting all other options, he picked up a copy of *Bhuban*, an esteemed literary magazine printed

from Calcutta. He was particularly disdainful of it as they had rejected a story he had submitted as a youth, when he was still studying under Master-babu, a story he had been working on for almost an entire month. It had been a long time since he'd picked up one of them, he realized, as he flipped through the articles and fiction pieces—'The Darkness of the Day', 'Midnight's Magic', 'Children of a Lost World'—and suddenly, his eyes fell on one of them, titled 'My Universe'. The byline read: Madhubati Lal. He read the entire story, from start to finish, three times over. The simplicity of her language and the lucidity of her thought amazed him. She amazed him. To be published in such a reputable journal!

He found Madhu sitting in the kitchen, stirring something over the fire. He held out the magazine to her. 'You've been published in *Bhuban*?' he asked.

'So what? It's hardly a big deal,' she said, brushing it off.

'It is a big deal! It's an amazing deal. I didn't know you wrote. Do you still write?' he asked.

'No, that was my first and last. I don't have much time these days. Father says I must learn to sew and sing first, or else my groom's family may reject me,' she replied wistfully. 'Now go, let me do my work,' said Madhu, turning her face from his so he wouldn't be able to see the smile that had curled up in the corner. Just being near him made her feel flighty.

The rest of the day he didn't see Madhu at all. When Chandan returned home, the two men sat in the living room in conversation.

'What do you think of everything that's going on in Calcutta?' asked Chandan. 'I hear that some poets sang "Vande Mataram" at a congressional hearing and that there was a huge uproar about it?'

'Yes, and the English have now banned it from being uttered. There is chaos brewing in the city and riots may soon follow,' said Som. 'Father has forbidden us to go there for a while till things settle down. Here in these parts, it's hard to tell that there is so much turbulence in the rest of the country. You are lucky!'

'Or perhaps much too shielded for our own good,' said Chandan. 'But I am doing my part. I educate my students, I educate my daughter. I make sure they are all aware of what is going on. Madhu reads the current magazines and often discusses politics with me, you know.'

At that moment Madhu walked in on the two men. 'That's only because you have no other male companions to bore to tears and I have no females to compare clothes and jewellery with,' she laughed. 'I'm not an intellectual by choice, rather, by circumstance. Now come, dinner is served, it will get cold.'

Madhu had taken great pains to prepare her specialities that evening. Burnt eggplants and deep-fried lentil balls, browned to perfection were followed by potatoes tossed with green onions and her speciality—a fish curry with mustard seeds, which was considered among the best in the village.

'This is truly amazing,' said Som, licking his fingertips and asking for more. Madhu just smiled.

That recipe never failed.

At dinner, Chandan informed Som that his carriage had been repaired. 'I shall leave first thing in the morning then,' he said. 'I've imposed on the two of you long enough.'

Madhu sat in front of them on the floor, her chin resting on her knees, silently swaying the fan to one side of her guest, the bamboo swishing as it hit the air between them. She looked up at him and they held each other's gaze for a brief second. That evening, while the two men conversed about nationalism and politics, Madhu was absorbed in the turmoil of her thoughts that raced agitatedly through the events of the entire day—Som walking in on her bathing, their long walk together, their kiss, his lips, his touch... As darkness fell over Radhanagar and the hours to Som's departure crept closer, Madhu decided to put her secret to sleep—once and for all.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING CAME without any warning. The distant cawing of crows crept into her dreams and roused Madhu from her deep slumber. She sat up in bed, her mind still half asleep, not quite grasping the reality around. Suddenly she gasped as she realized it was daytime and perhaps she had slept longer than she'd meant to. Som would be leaving soon and she had no time to waste.

Hastily, she put on a fresh sari—a simple yellow cotton with tiny embroidered dots and a thin orange border. Underneath, a cream-coloured blouse to match. The long sleeves moulded her arms and stopped right beneath her elbows. She swept a comb through her hair to even out any strays and patted it down with her hands to smoothen the top. She looked at herself in the mirror—hardly the epitome of elegance but it would just have to do for now. She came out of her room and found her father sitting out by the stoop of the veranda—alone. Som must still be sleeping, she thought, as she stepped out to go towards the well to fetch water. She would wash her face and then prepare the morning tea and breakfast for her father and their guest.

The cold water tickled her senses as she sat on the stone pedestal, splashing it over her face, her neck, her hands. The coolness sent a shiver through her spine, energizing her in preparation for the day that lay ahead. Not that she needed any extra motivation with Som around. She still thought about his kiss—his soft lips over hers and blushed as it aroused a fire within. As she looked up, she suddenly saw a white kurta-clad figure turning briskly and walking away up ahead. It was him! What was it with him watching her wash, she wondered. Patting herself dry she noticed that Som didn't walk towards the house but away from it, towards the road that led out to the main streets. Curious, she followed in the same direction only to see from a distance that there was a carriage waiting, horses ready, luggage tied. And her father was there, standing by the curb exchanging words with Som. They smiled warmly, then embraced. Her father patted him on the back and Som climbed into the carriage, which immediately took off. Madhu couldn't react—she just stood there, her heart slowly sinking as the carriage rolled away into the distance. He was gone, just like that; just in the blink of an eye. Like a whirlwind, like the Kalbaisakhi, Som had breezed into her life and then just as suddenly, departed. And what was left was the aftermath of the storm—like the damaged branches, the battered trees—her mauled and bruised heart. Yes, he was gone, without saying goodbye, without saying anything at all.

She hesitantly walked up to her father. 'He left?' she asked, as if she didn't know the answer. 'Yes, he

decided to leave early to get a head start,' Chandan replied. 'You know the young men these days,' he chuckled, 'always in a rush to get somewhere.'

Back in the house, Madhu sat in front of the stove, watching the milk boil over and couldn't stop wondering why he would suddenly leave without a farewell. Surely, she deserved at least that much. Or, was it just that—that she wasn't worth anything? That she was just a kiss, a brief fling and nothing more. Now, he would return to his zamindari life and forget all about the last two days—flipping them away like a mosquito bite: a brief and minor irritation. But in her mouth, she could still taste the sweetness of his kiss. No, she would never forget it and this fact pleased as well as alarmed her.

Som had a lot on his mind that morning as he hurried back to Panchkula. He had almost forgotten till late last night that they were hosting an important guest that day—the zamindar of Gobindapur. His parents would never forgive him if he missed the event. If he left early, he'd still be able to make it on time. He was annoyed to realize that he had been distracted the last two days by Madhu and now, that morning, it was time to get back on track.

When he arrived home, back to Mani House, he rushed straight away to find his father, who was still in his residential quarters in the North Wing—in the antapur, the interior part of the mansion where outsiders weren't allowed. As he walked through the courtyard, his father seeing him called out, 'You're back, are you?'

'Yes! What a nightmare the last two days have been! Did you get my message?' said Som. 'If it hadn't been for the kindness of Chandan-babu, I don't know where I'd be right now.'

'Where else would you be but back home?' quipped his mother, who now joined them. Kamala Debi was a fine woman, a true zamindarni. She was dressed in a tasteful, muted moorland green Kanchipuram silk sari—the body highlighted in gold dots and creeper design and the pallu, a rich orange and gold. 'The guests will be here soon, go and get ready.'

Som knew better than to argue with his mother. He and his father just exchanged glances as he rushed off to his room. A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door and Kashi, his servant, entered to let him know that Narendranath Barman had arrived. Som put on a cream-coloured silk kurta and churidar and slung a traditional nakshi kantha shawl over his shoulder. Like most men of his generation, he didn't often wear dhotis unless it was absolutely mandatory.

As he entered the formal living room, located in the South House, he found Narendranath and his wife sitting on the embroidered settee and he joined his hands together to greet them.

'Som, Som! You look grown up! It is good to see you again. And this is my daughter, Shyamali,' said Narendranath Barman, pointing to the young woman sitting on the opposite side, whom Som hadn't spotted till then.

The woman seemed to be Madhu's age but was strikingly different in every other way. She was fair

and tall. Her hair was carefully curled into an intricate bun that was held with a gold-toothed comb. Heavy gold earrings hung from her lobes, tugging them down with their weight and her hands and neck were adorned with bangles and a long chain. She had on a silk peach-coloured sari, embroidered in yellow kundan design. If Madhu was the quintessence of beauty at its most modest and simplest of forms, then Shyamali epitomized it in her lavishness and glamour.

'Is this your first time in these parts?' asked Som.

'Here, yes. I was raised in Calcutta, in the city. I didn't come with Father to the country often because I used to get bored very quickly. But I have to say that this mansion is magnificent. I definitely wouldn't mind living here,' she said, smiling demurely at him.

'Well, you will just have to come back and visit us then,' said Som, returning her smile.

'Oh, we will. Your father has kindly invited us to stay for the Durga Puja next month. He insists that it is something not to be missed in this house.'

Later that evening, after the guests had left, Som finally found some private time with his father. He told him of Chandan Lal's hospitality and generosity and how he had spent the last two days reconnecting with his old Master-babu. Of course, he didn't mention Madhu. 'Well, why don't we invite them over for Durga Puja?' said Gopaldas Mallick.

Som had hoped his father would say just that. Since he had left Radhanagar his thoughts had been drifting in that direction, northwards, far away from

Panchkula. From time to time Madhu's eyes floated up in front of his and try as he might, he couldn't shake the image off. He thought what happened in Radhanagar was part of becoming a man and a true zamindar—claiming what was his. But he hadn't bargained for this—to be possessed himself. He realized then that he had to see her again, or else she would continue to haunt him. Som smiled and replied, 'Of course, as you wish. I will write to him at once.'

Madhu's life had almost gone back to normal since Som had left—during the day at least. She busied herself with her daily chores, and had now taken up embroidery after much cajoling by Neelu, her only female friend's mother. 'You must behave like a lady now,' she would say. 'Enough of those books, you must cultivate your other talents as well.' Madhu would just roll her eyes and pick away at her needlework, trying to smoothen out the mess she had made, getting bored after a flower or two and wasting most of her afternoons gazing out of the window, wondering which village Som must be travelling to right then. She would fantasize of a different life—one where she was a zamindar's daughter too and perhaps would meet Som at a social gathering. Their lives would be interconnected through their families, their land. Som wouldn't run away as he had; he would openly woo her. There would be no shame, no scandal.

There was a knock on the door. Madhu put aside her stitching to answer it. It was a letter for her father. She flipped the envelope around to see who it was

from. Her heart stopped for a second as she read the return address scrawled in black ink: Mani House, Panchkula. She almost tore open the letter herself only to remember that it was meant for her father. She couldn't wait till he returned home that evening. Time had never felt so unending; the clock seemed to be tied with heavy weights—dragging each foot behind the other. But slowly and surely, like it did each day, five o'clock arrived and with it, Chandan Lal's footsteps. 'There's a letter for you,' she cried out, without even bothering to greet him or take his briefcase from his hand. 'It's from Panchkula, looks important.' She handed him the envelope and waited impatiently, chewing at the end of her sari while Chandan slowly tore open the envelope, obviously in no such anxiety as his daughter. His forehead wrinkled, then smoothened; his eyebrows raised, then lowered and all the while Madhu just wanted to tear the letter away from his hand. But she just held her breath as he patiently perused the contents.

'Well, my dear, the letter is from Som. He has invited us to Mani House for a few days during Durga Puja,' he said.

'Oh?' Madhu said, casually. 'So will we be going?'

'I think so! What do you say? Yes, yes I think we shall go.'

And so it was decided that Madhu and her father would be spending Durga Puja at Mani House, reaching just before Mahalaya—the first day of the festivities, when the Goddess descends on earth and

marks the beginning of Devi Paksha, the fortnight of the Pujas. 'Oh Father,' she cried in happiness and gave him a huge hug.

'I'm glad it makes you so happy, Madhu,' he said, slightly surprised since most of the time his daughter showed no enthusiasm to visit anyone, being mostly content in her own solitary existence. It had always worried him but now he felt pleased seeing she was ready to mingle with society.

The next week, Chandan surprised her with two new saris that he had a friend bring up from Calcutta. 'You will need proper clothes when we are there, so consider this an early Puja gift.' Madhu had already, without permission, gone through two bundles that were stored in the spare room, underneath the bed. They contained her mother's clothes—ones that she had been too young to wear before and over time, they had been forgotten. She had held her mother's wedding sari for a long time, tracing her fingers along the gold zari embroidery that formed floral patterns along the body. The deep red looked stunning against her complexion and Madhu decided that if she were to get married, she would wear what her mother had worn. She knew what others would say when they heard of it. It was blasphemous in Hindu culture to wear second-hand clothing on auspicious occasions—everything had to be new to symbolize a new beginning. But she didn't care. From whatever she had heard from her father, they had had a heavenly marriage for the two years that they were together and to Madhu, wearing her mother's wedding sari

would be a lucky charm; a promising beginning of her new life.

The weeks had passed slowly and lethargically till it was almost the day for them to leave. 'They will be sending a carriage for us,' said Chandan to his daughter. 'It should be here early morning, day after tomorrow. Are you all packed?'

'Yes, almost. Just a few little things left here and there,' Madhu replied.

'Do you have the gifts I bought for them?' he enquired.

'Yes, they're all safely packed and the mangoes are in the big basket, tied securely,' she assured him.

As promised by Som, the carriage arrived, two days later, promptly at six in the morning. It was a two-horse carriage so the journey would be just about two hours to Panchkula. If they had travelled on an ox cart as most from their village did, it would have taken them at least four. Madhu had barely been able to sleep the whole night in anticipation of the trip. This was the first time they had been invited to stay at a zamindar's house, to attend a glamorous Durga Puja. Of course, the icing on the cake was the young master of the house who was obviously not as impervious to her existence as she had initially imagined. He did want to see her again; there was no question that it was he who had orchestrated this visit. She wasn't naive. In all the years her father had taught in that house, he had never been invited there on a social occasion. But now the Mallick carriage had been sent specially for them.

Madhu and Chandan travelled across the Bardhaman countryside, idly glancing out of the window at the world that passed by. It was sights they had seen every day—Krishna, loading up his cart with his crops, to sell in the market; there was Neelu running around in the fields—her mother probably shouting out to her to come back at once, thought Madhu, smiling to herself. There was the Kali temple, the Panchavati, the scholars sitting around chanting Sanskrit slokas. The lush yellow fields of mustard swayed playfully in the wind and the date trees loomed high, peering down at everything below. But somehow, through the encasement of the carriage, they all felt distant; like a different world, an alternative reality. If Madhu were outside with Neelu, they would be whispering to each other as to who was in the carriage. They would fantasize that it was a prince from Calcutta, or maybe a British lieutenant. He was going to visit his mistress; perhaps eloping with his beloved and deciding to take refuge at Radhanagar. Yes, there wasn't much to do but let one's imagination go wild in these parts. But today, she didn't have to pretend. Today, Madhu was living her dream and relishing every moment of it.

'Oh look, there's Mani House, up ahead, you can see it way in front if you strain your eyes, spread across the horizon,' said Chandan.

What Madhu saw made her heart pound ominously. She was not just mesmerized and in awe but also felt a strange sense of pride, knowing that that was Som's inheritance; his bloodline flowed through its

walls, mingling with its whiteness. As they rolled closer and closer, she could make out all four of the houses that made up the entire estate. They stood at each corner as emblems of a lineage; as a mark of the Mallick sovereignty that was so widely renowned and respected; as if guarding the centre where a secret lay; where the private world of the Mallicks was really at play—one that she would soon be entering.

She had a visual image of the estate from her childhood. She remembered feeling dwarfed by the magnificence, the lavishness of the decorations, the dimensions of the staircases that arched around the house; by the zamindar himself who seemed so much larger than life. Not that she was unimpressed with what she saw now, but this time, it was what was on the other side of the walls that interested her more.

The carriage crawled to a stop and Chandan stepped out first, helping his daughter out. Seconds later, they were joined by two servants who led them towards the house. As Madhu began to follow her father, she noticed that one of the servants had split ways and was heading in the opposite direction. He stopped and turned towards them.

'Chandan-babu, your room is in the East House but the lady's residence will be in the West House,' he said.

Madhu at first was alarmed at being separated from her father so soon. 'Are you sure?' she stammered. Perhaps it was a mistake. The estate was so large that living in two separate houses was almost like not having him there at all. Although, in the grander

scheme of things, she realized, if there was to be anything between Som and her, perhaps this was the best arrangement after all.

'Yes, those were the orders,' the man replied. Madhu turned towards her father with pleading eyes, as if to say don't forget about me, and then walked away from him in the opposite direction, following the servant who was carrying her luggage.

'There are some gifts in the carriage,' she told him, 'make sure they are delivered to Kamala Debi.' And in saying so, she realized she wasn't so terrible at giving out orders as she thought she'd be. Perhaps this wasn't a lifestyle she would have to get adjusted to after all. Maybe she'd just slip into it.

The servant led Madhu through a labyrinth of corridors and hallways inside the West House. Madhu's eyes traced the intricate latticework on the balconies and the railings as she walked by, not daring to touch anything. Finally, she was shown into what was to be her very own room for the next few days and closing the door behind him, the servant left her alone.

Did Som know she had arrived? Was he going to come by soon? She didn't know what to do with herself as she wandered around the enormous room, almost twice the size of her bedroom at home. The large, four-poster bed occupied the centre of the room with an armoire standing across from it. Madhu started to unpack her things and organize them. There was a knock on the door. 'Come in,' she said.

It opened softly and a woman mildly stuck her head through. She was hesitant at first, her eyes looking

around, then smiled as they rested on Madhu's face. 'You're the teacher's daughter, right? I wanted to make sure you were settling in,' she said.

'Yes,' exclaimed Madhu, a little surprised and wondering whom she was talking to. She was a large woman, a bit older than herself and Madhu suspected that her proportions made her look older than she really was. Her long hair was braided behind and left down, unlike the traditional buns and intricate hairstyles of most zamindari women. She wore a soft pink sari, covered in matted silver shell design, the border and end displaying silver-yellow zari work. It wasn't fussy but tastefully exquisite, far superior to anything Madhu owned and she couldn't help feeling like the poor country mouse.

'Oh, I'm Bimala, I'm Gopaldas's niece. But you can call me Bini. We have quite a few guests staying, so my sister-in-law Minakshi and I have been asked to take care of those in this wing. So let me tell you about the practical things now,' she said, speaking rapidly. 'The guests have been divided up into the East and West Houses. Mostly they're all close family—aunts, uncles, cousins, and some family friends. You'll eventually meet them all, I suppose. We also need help with some of the work that's traditionally done by the women. Kamala Debi has been so busy overseeing the entire two weeks that Minakshi and I are a bit short-handed,' said Bini.

'Oh gladly,' said Madhu, 'anything...' but before she could finish her sentence, she was cut off by Bini. She needed someone to assist her with the alpana—an

intricate, ritualistic Bengali artwork created with a mixture of rice paste and water that was mandatory during special occasions.

'Yes, as a matter of fact...' started Madhu but was again interrupted. 'Perfect. Well, why don't you get some rest and freshen up. I will see you at lunch downstairs. Hopefully you'll get to meet the rest of the family tomorrow evening during the big dinner.' And with that, Bini walked out.

This was far more information than her head could absorb at the moment. She would just forget about what she'd heard and take it a day at a time, she decided. First things first: to get herself a proper outfit for the lunch. She'd have to save her finest of saris for the dinner and the actual days of the festival, which didn't leave her with much option during the day.

Opting for a simple yellow and light blue cotton print, she put on her mother's little gold studs in her ears and a pair of simple, thin gold bangles on her small wrists. They jingled happily as she tied her hair into a neat bun at her nape and touched surma over her eyes. Satisfied with what she saw in the mirror, she left the room in search of the others. She heard voices and laughter coming from the courtyard below and following it, arrived in the midst of two women—immaculately dressed in the finest looms, jewellery dripping from their arms and necks; nose rings in place; bindis dotted; eyes lined; nothing out of place. They immediately stopped their chatter, staring silently and challengingly at her. As

Madhu lowered her head and tried to walk by, they whispered amongst themselves. 'That's Chandan Lal, the teacher's daughter,' said one.

'Oh? Is that right? She's so plain. Look at her. *What* is she wearing?' said the other.

'What do you expect? She's from Radhanagar,' and they giggled softly. Luckily just at that moment, Bini happened to walk by and with the same overexuberance from earlier that morning, she put her arm around Madhu and swept her towards the two women who stood rigidly, shooting conspiring glances towards her.

'Ladies, this is Madhu, Chandan Lal's daughter. Madhu, that, over there, is my sister-in-law Minakshi,' she said, pointing at the taller of the two women, wife of Som's elder brother. She was thin; her long, narrow face had chiselled edges, sharp, like her stare and her words. She gave a suppressed smile to Madhu, barely managing to let it escape her lips, as if even that was too much effort.

'We're pleased to have you here,' she said, her scorn taking on no disguise in her tone.

'And this is Shyamali. She is zamindar Narendranath Barman's only daughter,' said Bini, now smiling at the younger of the two women—absolutely striking in her appearance. She wore a gorgeous soft green silk sari with muted yellow embroidery and a pair of heavy bell-shaped earrings that rang with every minute head movement, the sound matched by the gold bracelets that covered her arms almost till her elbows. Women like her, Madhu thought sulking to herself, was the

reason she was dreading the next few days. All through that day, her head had been soaring in wild adventures that may happen. But now, next to Shyamali's elegance, Madhu was reminded of where she came from and felt reduced back to her plain, dull self.

Dinner that night was an excruciatingly painful experience. They remained in the West House—the two daughters-in-law, Shyamali, some cousins, and two aunts. Her father dined with the others in the East House, she was told, and she'd see him the following day. The meal itself was impeccable: served in spotless, shining kansha dinnerware. The light bronze-coloured glasses had delicate etching on the sides and several little bowls were neatly arranged around the main plate, in traditional Bengali style. Servants entered and exited with large serving bowls full of Bengali delicacies such as pumpkin, squash, potatoes with poppy seeds, and each of her seven little bowls slowly filled, one by one.

Two women sat on either side of Madhu and from their conversation she gathered they were Som's aunts, the sisters of Kamala Debi. They were polite and civil with her, unlike Minakshi and Shyamali who blatantly held her in contempt. 'Do you sing, my dear?' one of the sisters asked her.

'Well, I sing to myself often, but I haven't had any formal lessons,' admitted Madhu.

'She didn't have a mother, that's probably why. Poor thing,' the other sister muttered under her breath, between mouthfuls of food, chewing noisily and slurping the chutney through her fingers.

Madhu had to stifle the giggle that threatened to escape from her throat. 'I find it more useful to read a book than take singing lessons,' said Madhu boldly, at which the younger girls stopped their discussion and all exchanged looks that didn't go past Madhu.

'*Some* of us have to *imagine* what we don't have by reading about it,' chuckled Shyamali loudly.

Madhu held her ground. She didn't come here all the way to see Som, only to have her ego flattened. 'If one doesn't have stylish clothes and expensive jewellery to hide one's flaws, what can one do?' said Madhu, 'I suppose one *must* rely on hiding behind the falsity of one's intellect.'

Bini looked firmly in Shyamali's direction. 'You'll grow old sooner or later, you'll lose your taut skin, your thick black hair, your energetic gait. But your wisdom—it can only keep growing,' she said. At that moment, Madhu realized that as much as she would get pushed into the corner over the next few days, she wouldn't remain friendless. She would have loved to say more but realized it wasn't so much her own reputation which prompted her to hold her tongue, but her father's.

There were a few seconds of immaculate silence, which was broken by Bini's hustling and fussing around all the guests, making sure everyone had enough rice and second helpings of the vegetables. 'No matter how much I seem to eat, unless I get some meat, do not tell satiated. After Dashami, we can start eating meat again,' she sighed.

So far the visit wasn't anything near to what

Madhu had envisioned despite it being the first day. Over twelve hours at Mani House, she had been separated from her father, had had to defend herself from a bunch of vixens, and there was no sight of Som anywhere. How would she be able to suffer an entire week of this, she wondered.

The next morning, Madhu skipped breakfast altogether, trying to avoid Shyamali and Minakshi. She just took some tea in her room that the servant had brought in early morning. The brew was delicately fragrant and so sublime that Madhu couldn't help but admire how a simple drink could be elevated to such heights of perfection. To lie stretched out on a magnificent four-poster bed, sipping tea as the sun crawled out of the darkness—this was life in a zamindari house.

Bini came knocking on her door slightly past nine, with her usual gusto and energy at full force in the morning. She informed Madhu that while the main alpana in the temple was to be done by Kamala Debi herself, they would be drawing the designs in the rest of the house.

'Where are the others?' enquired Madhu.

'The girls—that is, Minakshi and Shyamali—are with the tailor, Kamala Debi is fixing the menu with the help of her two sisters, and the men are all in the South House doing God knows what,' Bini said, all in one breath.

Madhu and Bini started with the alpana in the entryway outside the West House. Madhu dipped the rag into the cream-coloured mixture, letting it trickle

down to her wrist as she traced the main motif in circles, with steady, sure hands. She had always done the alpana with Neelu in their village every year, decorating the entrance of the Kali temple. As she drew over a leaf, someone suddenly bumped right into her, knocking the rag out of her hands and smudging the entire design with a big bold gash of white all across. She let out a soft scream in shock and looked up to see who had committed that heinous crime. It was Som. He too froze on seeing her. Bini was a few feet away and evaluating the damage, she said, 'What had I told you? To stay away from here, didn't I?' She didn't realize that Madhu's and Som's eyes were now locked and they were completely unaware of what she was saying.

'Oh, how rude of me, I didn't even introduce you to each other,' Bini babbled on.

'We've met,' said Som, still holding her gaze. 'How are you?'

'I...I'm f—f—fine,' Madhu stammered.

'And your father?' he enquired.

'He's fine too,' said Madhu. She wanted to say more but then someone called out to him from upstairs and Som, excusing himself, briskly walked away.

With Bini hovering around, Madhu forced herself to shrug the incident off and continued working on the design, trying to rectify the huge smudge, as if that was all that mattered. All the while, her mind raced hysterically and she just couldn't keep it still.

Bini then informed her that she'd be going to the South House to paint the lobby area since that was

where the guests would be brought in. Madhu should continue with the West House and then move on to the East House, if she had time.

She was alone now, which relieved her greatly. It was easier to let go and be perturbed than feign calmness. She heard footsteps behind her, strong and sure, clicking on the marble floor. 'I was hoping to catch you alone,' said the voice she'd been longing to hear. That same deep, soft, voice that had been ringing inside her for the last couple of months. She inhaled sharply, as if holding her breath would be the only thing that could keep her together right now. Madhu remained speechless, unsure of what would escape from her lips if she dared to open them right then.

His hands wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her closer and in trying to protest, her hands pushed against his arms. The touch sent an electrifying shock through her. Instinctively, Madhu wanted to drape her arms around him—all those feelings that she had bottled up inside for so long, gushing out of her. But she had to remind herself where she was and that he was the one who had walked out on her back in Radhanagar, without saying anything.

Sensing her resistance, Som asked, 'Why are you silent? Aren't you glad you came?'

'I shouldn't have come,' Madhu said sternly.

Som looked deeply into her. He wanted to pull her into him, to feel her closeness, to tell her he never wanted her to leave, but they were right in the middle of the main entrance of the house, from

where messengers, servants, cooks and maids came and went. He had to be careful of his actions. 'Meet me tonight then, by the lake, at midnight. I have to see you alone,' he whispered, stepping closer. He could feel the heat between them now and it was driving him insane.

'How can I?' said Madhu, thinking that he must have lost his mind.

Just then they heard footsteps coming in and sprang apart—Madhu continuing with her alpana design and Som hastily walking away. Just before he turned, Madhu looked one last time at him and silently shook her head, as if to say, I'm sorry but I really can't. Shyamali approached her as she pretended to diligently do her artistry. 'Was that Som I just saw?' she asked, looking suspiciously at her. 'I didn't realize you two knew each other. But he doesn't waste any time in introductions when it comes to women. That's our Som,' she said, looking directly at Madhu, icily for what seemed like seconds, before walking away, in Som's direction. Her footsteps had an air of urgency as she rushed through the hallway, straightening her sari and hair.

Dinner that night was with the entire Mallick family and their guests in the main dining hall in the South House. The freshly washed banana leaves, set on the floor, glistened under droplets of water, like little beads of pearls. A pinch of salt and two green chillies decorated the top right corner of each leaf. And as the guests took their places and the feast began, little by little, each vacant corner of the smooth,

flat surface was filled with every imaginable Bengali delicacy: fried mung dal, eggplant dipped in batter and deep fried, served with a delicate mustard sauce, croquettes made of banana flowers, gourd cooked in milk, spinach with pumpkin, and a heavenly pulao. Madhu had never been to a feast close to this, not even at weddings. And in the end, for dessert, every possible variety of Bengali sweets was brought in. The rice pudding, flavoured with cardamom, was delicious, and Gopaldas announced that the traditional Bengali sandesh had been brought in straight from the newest and largest sweet shop in Calcutta. 'You have to eat it immediately while it's still fresh,' he urged his guests.

Som sat next to his father, directly across from Madhu and every few minutes, she'd steal a glance in his direction to find that he was blatantly staring at her. It made her anxious to know she was being scrutinized; self-conscious that her every movement was being tracked. And perhaps what bothered her most was that she was reacting the way she did—disturbed and obviously affected. When their eyes met, Madhu would quickly look away, in case they were spotted; lest their silent game became too obvious to the others. Kamala Debi sat between her daughter-in-law and Shyamali, and Madhu noticed that the three of them had formed quite a cosy bond as they shared hushed conversations and laughs. Kamala Debi, dressed in an exquisite silk brocade sari, a thick gold necklace that came down to the neckline of her blouse, the end of her sari draped

over her head, stared Madhu up and down as if she knew exactly what was going on. Madhu couldn't help feeling nervous as if they'd been caught.

After dinner, Kamala Debi caught hold of Som and pulled him over to where she was standing with Shyamali. 'This poor girl has complained to me that she's been bored and lonely all day while you've been busy running around with errands,' she scolded her son. 'Why don't you take her around the grounds and show her our estate. She's been dying to see the other houses and all the artwork in them.'

'Of course, if it's not too much trouble,' purred Shyamali as she and Som walked out, away from the other guests and into the hushed darkness of the gardens.

Madhu saw all of this from the corner of her eye and just before she could turn away, Kamala Debi's stare caught hers. She fixed her cold eyes on Madhu briefly, as if challenging her, then turned and walked away.

Madhu shivered. But Bini came around and put her arm around her shoulders. 'Come, you must try one of our delicious sweet paans,' she said, gently pulling her away.

'I wonder why Kamala Debi refuses to talk to me,' said Madhu.

Bini sighed. 'This family is sometimes hard to understand. Kamala Debi can come off as cold, hostile, but she isn't vicious. She is protective. Given their position in society, she has a lot to shield. She is distrustful of strangers at first and yes, perhaps

even judgemental, but she's not unfair and once she takes a liking to you, she'll transform into the kindest soul you'll ever meet. Even when Minakshi first entered our house, it took her a long time to accept her daughter-in-law, but look at them now. And my uncle—if it wasn't for him, God knows where I'd be right now. Never once making me feel that I wasn't his own flesh and blood; that I'm an orphan.'

'I'm sorry,' said Madhu. 'I didn't know you had lost both your parents.'

'Yes, my mother passed away while giving birth to me,' she smiled sadly. 'Like you, I too have grown up motherless, but both my uncle and aunt have never treated me as anything less than their own. Som and Satya are like my own brothers, we would die for each other.'

Madhu looked on warmly at Bini, 'So you are close to them, then?'

'Yes, very. They're very good men.' Then, looking at Madhu earnestly, she said, 'There's a lot riding on both their shoulders though, their choices in life aren't going to be easy. Being born into this family isn't all that glamorous as one may expect. There are consequences for the comfort they enjoy. Som and Satya have grown up carrying the burden of the Mallick name and have never been allowed to forget what it means. But whereas Satya has slipped very easily into the role of the zamindar, Som always retaliates. It's always his duty against his will. After my uncle, both stand to inherit the zamindari but I feel Som would have preferred to do something else.

Things will be difficult for him. They won't always be black and white the way they sometimes appear to you and me.'

Madhu didn't know what to make of what Bini had just said. Why was she telling her this? Did she know there was something between her and Som? Did she see them at dinner, stealing glances with each other? She didn't know what to do about meeting Som that night. Her heart egged her on, begging her to go—to see him, to hold him, to stop playing this charade. But her instincts told her it would be insane; complete madness to be so indiscreet. Som wasn't a child, yet how could he be so impulsive and impetuous as to suggest something so inappropriate? And what did that say about his opinion of her? Did he think that just because she had allowed him liberties the one time in Radhanagar, that she was immoral? That she would let him carry on a secret, covert affair, under the roof she shared not just with her father but now, also his entire family? She was a respectable, educated woman. Her actions too had consequences. Yes, it was true that she couldn't help the way she felt about him, but she could certainly control what she did about it.

After dinner, when all the guests returned to the seclusion of their own rooms, and when Gopaldas Mallick and Kamala Debi too finally retired to their side of the mansions for the night, all the doors bolted, all the lights turned off, Madhu lay awake in her bed, staring at the ceiling, her heart restless, her mind agitated. She tossed and turned this way and

that, unable to fall asleep. There was stark silence outside, as if awaiting her dreaded decision.

As the minutes ticked by and the fated hour drew near, Madhu's heart began to thunder. She decided at that point to just stop thinking, to let her instincts take over and dictate her actions. What happened during the day was just a performance; a theatre, a passing of time for the real drama to begin. At the stroke of twelve, as the entire Mallick residence and all their guests were wrapped in their dreams, Madhu quietly tiptoed out of her room, past the latticed veranda and into the quiet, moonlit night. Yes, she had to admit there was a part of her that wanted to go, see what would happen. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't see this through.

The lake wasn't far, just a ten-minute walk past the front gardens. The guards were sleeping, the birds were nestled in the trees and the heavens stood silently, bearing witness to two illicit lovers slowly treading their quiet footsteps across the lush lawns, closer and closer towards each other.

Madhu gasped as Som's strong arms reached for her through the shadows, pulling her into the even darker depths within the trees. 'I thought you wouldn't come,' he whispered huskily.

'How could I not?' she whispered back. 'Although I have a horrible feeling your mother is watching us as we speak.'

Som laughed. 'Don't be ridiculous. No one knows we're here. There's no one to save you now, even if you were to scream,' he smirked. He scooped her

into his arms and swirled her around as she let out a soft scream in surprise. This time, there were no inhibitions, no waiting to see if someone was watching. He held her firmly in his arms, then trapped her in his hold and there was no way she could escape even if she wanted to. His lips gently grazed over hers, the warmth tingling Madhu from somewhere deep inside. Som planted little butterfly kisses on her cheeks, her chin, her jawline, before his mouth went back to rest on hers, claiming it once again. But Madhu pushed him back, holding him at a distance.

'How could you have just left Radhanagar like that? Without saying a word to me?' she demanded.

Som looked downwards, defeated. 'Look at me,' she insisted. 'Look me in the eye and tell me the truth.'

'I didn't know I'd want to see you again,' he said, simply.

'And that's it? That's all you have to say for yourself?' said Madhu, hurt. 'What was I to you? Was I something you do in all of your trips—a bit of fun on the side to take away the edge from your lonely nights on the road?'

'For your information,' he retorted, 'I've never done something like that before. That night in Radhanagar, something happened to me. An inexplicable feeling gripped me and I was overcome by it. After meeting you that day, I was bewitched, I was captivated and I lost control of my senses. I thought if I leave, I would forget you. But as soon as I returned home, I realized I was wrong. That is why I orchestrated

this invitation—because I had to see you again.' He held her hands in his, tightening his palms around hers. 'Madhu, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you by leaving like that. I want to make up for it,' he pleaded.

'How? By meeting me like this in the middle of the night? By hiding, lying, and scheming behind our parents' back? Do you have any idea of the repercussions if we were spotted by someone?' she said.

'Madhu!' he said, holding her firmly now, trying to pacify her. 'I don't have all the answers right now. I just know how I feel about you and it's pulling me in an unknown direction. I don't know where we're headed but don't you think we owe it to each other to find out?'

'I don't like to hide like this, meeting in secrecy,' Madhu said, flustered. 'Darling,' said Som, 'doesn't matter where you are. We know each other most intimately only in our minds, where we are naked, vulnerable, and most real. Just imagine that I'm seeing you every moment; reading your every thought; that you can never hide from me.'

'Stop being so uptight and learn to live a little,' he whispered into her, still holding her close, smelling her soft hair that tickled his skin. *Forget it,* Madhu thought to herself. He had a point. She decided since she had already risked everything to come out there, that she'd stop thinking about practical matters for a few minutes and immerse herself in the rapturous night. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, pushing herself into him, succumbing to her desires and to his passion. There was so much more she

wanted to ask, so much more she wanted to say but right then, her emotions kept getting in the way of practical questions. She'd save it for another time, she thought, as she felt his kisses, his touch, his heavy breathing and felt herself melting under his fingers.

She looked into his chiselled face, his dark eyes that coveted her. She belonged here, in his arms, which cradled her. Som buried his fingers into her long, loose hair, kissing her forehead, her eyelids, her nose, her mouth. He wanted to stay that way forever. He wanted to forget who he was. He wished he could court her openly, or be able to tell his parents that Madhu was the woman he wanted. But he knew this was a matter where he'd have to tread carefully. He couldn't rush it. For now, this would have to do, this concealed rendezvous which would have to come to an end soon because it was going to be twilight and the workers would wake up and start rushing about their chores. It was time to go back to their rooms, he realized forlornly.

CHAPTER FOUR

BACK IN BED, MADHU felt divided—one half of her was still in Som's arms, never wanting to leave; the other half felt wicked, that she'd done something utterly wrong. She felt ashamed that she'd have to hide her guilty secret for the rest of her life. Even Neelu may not understand. For a long time she remained awake, sleep being the farthest thing from her mind. Finally, when she tired of thinking round and round in circles, her eyes grew heavy and her thoughts sought rest.

The next day was Mahalaya, when the old moon waned and a new moon was born; when the Goddess Durga was invoked into the house by chantings of the Chandipath and Agomoni; when the eyes of the Devi would be drawn into the deity by the artisans, observing the ceremony of Chakku Daan. The rituals started early, by sunrise when worshippers would visit the holy river in remembrance of the dead. Som had gone to the shores of the Bhagirathi with the men of the party. But Madhu had to finish the final bits of the alpana design. The garden was drenched in oranges and yellows, fabrics, flowers, and the hustle of countless bodies—guests arriving, servants rushing, drummers beating on the dhaks—there

wasn't a space that remained uncovered. The Puja at Mani House would continue for the next ten days—ending on Dashami, the tenth and final day, when the body of the Goddess was immersed in the Bhagirathi river, mounted on the shoulders of all the men of the family.

The Durga Puja at Mani House was the largest in the entire Bardhaman district. The ceremony itself was conducted by five priests and in the evening, when they were finished for the day, music and singing performances were held in the large pavilion constructed in the garden followed by a magnificent dinner. Since the Mallicks were Vaishnavas, they did not believe in the sacrifice of animals and abstained from eating meat till Dashami, which always ended every year with an extravagant banquet.

Som had left the house early with the other men, before dawn, to perform rituals by the river just behind the estate. He was perturbed from the night before, unmindful and preoccupied. The priest conducting the rituals had to repeat the chanting several times for him to follow. Satya noticed his brother's pensiveness. 'The Goddess descends down to earth today but someone's mind seems to be floating in heaven,' he chuckled to one of their other cousins who was walking beside him. Som overheard this and was startled. His guilt brewed suspicion and paranoia and he felt the entire world knew of his secret and judged him. 'I think the Puja this year is just a precursor to a bigger celebration that may soon follow, am I right?' the cousin continued. 'Why else would Narendranath

Bhowmik cancel the annual Puja at his estate this year to partake in the Mallick's?'

Som was not completely oblivious to the larger issue that was being plotted behind the veil of Durga Puja that year: his marriage to Shyamali. He had known for a while that he was fast running out of time and excuses for holding off marriage. First it had been his studies that were central to his life, then his work. 'I will be travelling into the far corners of the district almost every day, is that the way to treat my wife? To bring her into a new home and then abandon her?' he would tell his mother. Truth was, he wasn't ready to commit—not to a woman he barely knew, with whom he would be forced to share his thoughts and his heart; towards whom he wasn't sure he could learn to develop any true feelings. Love, he thought idealistically, couldn't be trained. It was either there or not. He wasn't at the point in his life where continuing his family legacy was important; to think about future generations who would uphold the Mallick name. Satya was taking care of that. Som had a different concept of what love was—and Shyamali certainly didn't fit the bill. 'But you will learn to love,' Gopaldas had once told him. 'Love is not like the poetry you read, Som. What you are searching for is not love, it is romance. And romance is like the lines of a sonnet. It is lyrical; it is beautiful to the ears, the words and the rhythm ringing into your heart long after it's been read. But poetry, in the grand scheme of life, dear Som, is superfluous and unnecessary. Can't your life continue without it? Poetry is how you relax

at the end of a hard working day, zamindari is how you create the luxury of even having time.' But Som was young; he was not ready to compromise. He was not blind either. He could see clearly how different Madhu was...from Shyamali or for that matter even from the rest of the girls. She was not only beautiful but she also had a strong mind of her own; she was well read, could write and could hold her own in any discussion. The fact that she had achieved all this despite having to run the house without her mother's shelter was indeed admirable. Madhu fulfilled his idea of a companion, a life partner, and Som felt irresistibly drawn towards her.

When he returned to the house in the afternoon, it was already teeming with hundreds of guests. He tried to find Madhu but with every step, someone caught his hands and he was pulled into an obligatory conversation. The Mukherjees from Calcutta gushed on about how long it had been since he had visited them; the Sahas coaxed him into discussing the latest writers emerging from Bengal. Every now and then, he thought he spotted Madhu's face but as more and more people began to arrive and all shapes and features began to dissolve into each other, he thought perhaps it was only his imagination that had created her semblance.

Madhu had decided to wear one of her mother's saris that day. It was a rich, peacock blue Benarasi, embroidered in lotus flowers. Her hair was twisted into a voluptuous bun at the nape of her neck and a simple gold chain, belonging to her mother, touched

just above her collarbones. Walking out of her room that evening, she felt glamorous but when she saw Shyamali, dripping head to ankle in ornaments, she couldn't help feeling dwarfed. Shyamali's sari was laid richly in gold kundan work. The pattern on the material matched the heavy kaan, a traditional earring which covered her entire ear in gold and pearl beads. On her right arm was an armlet made of hollow gold and half a dozen gold bangles covered each hand. And as Shyamali walked through the crowds, turning heads, inspiring whispers amongst the guests, Madhu thought wistfully that at the end of the day, it was always beauty that would prevail.

After what seemed like hours of meandering through guests and idle conversation, Som finally caught a glimpse of Madhu—dressed in deep blue, standing somewhat awkwardly and looking unsurely around, amongst the crowds of people. Was she perhaps searching for him? She stood out not in her ornate appearance as the other visitors but in her minimalism—her bare neck with just the thin twinkling chain that gave a subtle sheen to her skin, the honey complexion showing through the folds of her sari. She exuded a loveliness far truer and he could not take his eyes off her. Her gaze too moved towards him, as if fatefully directed; her eyes met his and as they did, she smiled, suddenly feeling very shy, very self-conscious. There they stood, with a swarm of guests buzzing between them; there they stood—in their own world, completely oblivious to the hollering of Kamala Debi, calling out to Som from the other

end; oblivious to Chandan, now approaching Madhu, to sweep her away. For those few seconds, time and space lost meaning as they stood motionless, staring at each other through the crowds of people, hovering in their own universe.

Chandan hadn't told Madhu but that evening, there were two guests at Mani House who were of special interest to them—his friend Dwijendra and his son Bidyut. Dwijendra and Chandan's friendship went back to their childhood when living in Silgar, a smaller village a few hours away from Radhanagar. They went to school together and were almost as close as brothers. Chandan's father had passed away suddenly, from typhoid, when he was a young scholar in Calcutta, still studying. Money was tight, especially for a dignified funeral. In those hard times, it was Dwijendra, the munim or the chief administrator for Gopaldas's father, who had helped him financially. 'I'll pay you back with interest,' Chandan had promised him. When Dwijendra's son Bidyut was born and two years later, Chandan's late wife gave birth to Madhu, Dwijendra had said, 'Bhai, the only thing I'm interested in is the hand of your daughter in marriage for my son.' They made a pact that their first offspring be married to each other as soon as they were both of age and ready.

Although Chandan had left his old village of Silgar to make a new home at Radhanagar; although over the years as Madhu grew up to become a young, intelligent, independent woman and Bidyut into an accountant, working for none other than Gopaldas

Mallick, the two fathers remained staunch in the verbal promise they had made eighteen years ago. Over hushed letters the two friends had decided that it would be at the Mani House Puja that the two betrothed should meet.

Chandan, on seeing Madhu enter the pavilion, hesitantly approached his daughter—nervous about the soon-to-be significant meeting that would forever change her life. It's not that she didn't know about Bidyut—over the years he had made no effort to hide the fact that her future had already been settled. After all, it was a father's main duty to ensure that his daughter was handed over to a suitable family who would be able to take care of her in the future, in the same manner as he had. And who better to trust than his dear friend Dwijendra.

Bidyut was raised mostly in Panchkula, while his father was munim for the zamindar, his right-hand man who took care of all his financial affairs. But after twenty years in the service of the Mallick zamindari, Dwijendra retired from his post, and went back to the restful life in his hometown of Silgar. He set up a small accountancy and took care of the books of most local businesses. Bidyut, being a trained accountant himself, resented being back in Silgar and at the age of twenty, had charmed Gopaldas Mallick with his smooth words and skills in mathematics to procure a position as an accountant for him. Bidyut had higher aspirations and had his eyes set on the position of munim, one that had belonged to his father in the past. 'Mallick-babu,' he had said to Gopaldas in his

Slippert tone, 'you could easily be the largest landlord in Bardhaman, but you pay far too much in taxes. I can show you how to minimize your dues to the government.'

'But Bidyut, I don't want to cheat anyone,' Gopaldas had said.

'Oh but sir, you wouldn't be cheating anyone at all. See these calculations here? It's just a matter of representation of truth. If there is no lying, then there is no cheating, isn't that correct?' whispered Bidyut. Impressed by his dexterity with numbers and sincerity of tone, Gopaldas had appointed Bidyut assistant accountant to the present munim and gave him a permanent residence nearby.

Chandan put his arms around Madhu. 'Dear, there's someone I'd like you to meet,' he said, leading her away from the crowd.

'Who is it, Father?' asked Madhu curiously, but Chandan remained silent as he led her towards Dwijendra and his son.

'This is my daughter Madhubati,' he said, presenting Madhu before the two. 'Madhu, this is my dear old friend Dwijendra and his son Bidyut—whom you have heard so much about.'

Madhu stared speechlessly at Bidyut for a second—at his young, boyish face; his gleaming, eagar-to-please eyes; his brown silk kurta with glittering gold embroidery at the hem, the cream silk dhoti, the paisley printed shawl slung over his shoulder, his thick eyebrows that almost joined over the centre of his nose, his sweaty palms that rubbed

together as he folded them in greeting and smiled shiftily at her. His thin moustache stretched wide as his lips curved and Madhu shivered in instinctive repulsion. She immediately looked down, to avoid any eye contact. *Oh God, this can't be happening*, she thought. Although she'd always known about Bidyut, she hadn't really been prepared for an actual meeting, much less right here at Mani House.

'Let me see you, my dear,' said Dwijendra, lifting her head up by the chin. His face was soft, kind—something about his grey beard made Madhu trust him. He looked like an accomplished gentleman; a man who had much to be proud of but didn't let pride get in the way. He seemed like a man who had no airs, despite having a highly coveted position in the zamindar's administration. Years had smoothened out the rough edges of his face and Madhu felt warmth towards him. 'Don't be shy.' He had last laid eyes on her almost ten years ago and there she was, now a grown woman, soon to be his daughter-in-law. He had heard much about her—her education, the books she read, little arguments she had with her father, her independent way of thinking and he couldn't be prouder to have such a woman as his son's bride. The two old friends embraced warmly and then engaging in conversation, slyly walked away from the soon-to-be couple. Madhu suddenly realized she was stranded with Bidyut who was smirking annoyingly at her.

'I'm lucky my father had such good foresight and taste,' he said.

And it's a pity mine didn't, muttered Madhu under her breath.

'What's that?' asked Bidyut.

'Oh nothing, I was just saying, it's a pleasure to meet you finally,' she said, smiling politely.

Bidyut proceeded to give her a monologue on his life. 'I've been to Calcutta three times in the last year,' he boasted. 'And even dined with the Raja.' Madhu tried hard not to roll her eyes. She realized that perhaps she was unfairly judging him by comparing him with Som, knowing he would never measure up. But to know Som existed; to feel as she did for him; to be aware of the way he looked at her, creating a small knot on the left side of her chest and a yearning that gurgled from her belly; the way he recited poems to her, held her in his arms, and the spark she felt when he did—how could she ever meet anyone else without judging them? Anything less than Som would be a compromise and she wasn't ready to make any.

'Come,' Bidyut said, 'take a walk with me.'

Madhu reluctantly obliged, walking beside him but keeping a safe distance. Most of the time Bidyut spoke of himself, rarely asking for her opinion.

'I never wear anything but silk when I am outside,' he said. 'Gopaldas has got me special clothes brought all the way from the south. He's never done that for anyone other than his sons and has practically promised me the position of munim in a few years when he feels I'm ready. And then, I'll be in charge of everything. I'll have my own carriage, at least three servants and even mingle with the British.'

Madhu grew bored, tried to stifle several yawns, looking around anxiously for Som, for anyone who could rescue her. Once in a while she would look sideways at Bidyut, curious, wondering if she could really learn to love this man. From the corner of her eye she saw Som, engaged in conversation with other guests. He seemed so engrossed in his guests, his hands waving about before him as they did when he spoke about something passionately. She smiled to herself, looking downwards. When she raised her head to look at him, he was already looking in her direction, as if he knew. Once again their eyes met and this time she quickly turned her head around—guilty of being caught. She prayed that he would'nt come over and try to make conversation but of course, as luck would have it, that's exactly what he did just at the very moment. He excused himself from his guests, walked across the green, the thicket of people congregated in the makeshift pavilion and approached Madhu and Bidyut.

'Bidyut!' he said, but looking straight at Madhu, surprised to see them together.

'Som,' replied Bidyut, slightly bowing his head in acknowledgement. 'Once again this year's Puja has topped all others.'

'Yes, thank you,' said Som, still staring at Madhu who lowered her head in embarrassment.

'You two know each other?' asked Bidyut, as both Madhu and Som stood uneasily silent.

'Chandan Lal was my childhood tutor,' replied Som, his voice stern, his body stiff. Bidyut raised

an eyebrow. 'I would have thought you'd have had foreign teachers from Calcutta,' he said.

'Chandan-babu is one of the best, here and in Calcutta,' said Som, still standing inflexibly. His voice sounded forced, formal, his hand gripped one end of his shawl, as he stood up tall, his figure more looming and commanding than Madhu ever remembered—this was a side of his she'd never seen before.

Som wore a pure white kurta, with small gold buttons. His white dhoti had a thin black border and on his shoulder was slung a light, cream-coloured shawl—simple, with no design work but small tassel-like threads at the bottom. The material looked so soft, so decadent, finer than any pashmina Madhu had ever seen.

Bidyut reached for Som's shoulder. 'May I?' he enquired, stretching out his hand and carefully brushing it over the delicate weaving. 'Shahtoosh!' he exclaimed, clearly proud that he knew his stuff. 'The King of Wool; the finest of Kashmiri weaving made from the hair of the Tibetan antelope. It is said that the purest Shahtoosh is so thin, it can pass through a ring. Of course, it is only fitting that you should be wearing one,' he said, laughing forcibly, his voice tinged with false flattery. 'I haven't seen very many with my own eyes, of course. In these parts, we don't see Shahtoosh very often. But it's hard to miss—that thin, fragile material, the fine craftsmanship, it is unmistakable. First class!' he said, puckering his lips and making a smacking sound.

Som seemed unmoved and unaffected by Bidyut. Now his attention had shifted from Madhu and

was focused solely on the slighter, shiftier man who shuffled from one foot to the other in nervousness. 'I don't mean to bring up work at a time like this, but I expect you'll have those ledgers ready for me by next week?' he demanded.

'Of course, of course! Absolutely!' gushed Bidyut. An awkward silence hung in the air between the three of them; a tension so strained, it made Madhu want to scream in frustration.

'I see that you two know each other as well,' said Som after a while. He paused for some explanation but neither Madhu nor Bidyut seemed to speak up. 'But of course Bidyut, whom do you not know in these parts, am I correct?'

Again Bidyut sniggered. 'You can say that we've known each other since childhood, in a way.'

'But I don't want to interrupt your conversation,' Som continued, his mannerism rushed, impatient, and before Madhu could say anything—try to stop him, try to silently beg him to save her from her predicament—he abruptly walked away.

Was he jealous? she thought. He was the one who had approached them in the first place yet he seemed like he couldn't wait to leave their company. Why was he so full of contradictions? On the one hand, his eyes seemed to be searching hers, wondering what on earth she was doing with Bidyut. But on the other hand, they seemed cold and emotionless, all feeling having drained from them, like the banks during low tide, when the gushes of voluptuous waves receded and the desert-like, barren shores remained.

The musicians had begun taking their place on the platform under the pavilion. The strings of the sitar sounded through the night as, one by one, all the guests began to take their seats to enjoy the evening festivities that followed the religious ceremony. Som ushered guests to their places and then went up ahead and sat in the front with his parents. No sooner did he take his designated spot than he realized that Shyamali was sitting right beside him. She turned in his direction and smiled radiantly, her teeth shining like immaculate little beads of pearls. Som was sick of it all—the entire game. This entire Puja was like one big sham for desperate parents to find spouses for their children. These ridiculous match-ups, these ludicrous charades—strutting around, decorated from head to toe in their life's possessions in search of a husband—is that all life was about? Was even his Madhu part of that conspiracy? Was she no better than Shyamali?

The music recital was a blur to Madhu's ears. She vaguely recalled the soft sound of the sitar that danced through the evening air. Her thoughts circled around just one thing and one thing alone. Could she marry Bidyut and spend the rest of her life with him? All these years she had known that her husband had been chosen, but he had been only a notion; a vague concept that loomed ahead in the distance ; a future that was always imminent, around the corner, but one that would never arrive. Now, the reality of seeing him there that night, actually meeting him in the flesh, his shifty eyes, his untrusting smile—made that

portentous future more immediate. Now, he wasn't just an idea, he was a real person; a real man she would have to touch. Could she learn to love him?

She wondered what she, like everyone else, truly wanted from life. Was it happiness? And what was happiness if not just a state of mind. It changed from day to day, year to year. And where did true love fit in? Did love make someone happy? The idea of a powerful, destined passion that drew two people together, the way she was drawn to Som? Passion, she thought cynically, would eventually die. Love was not endless, love was not eternal. Look at her own parents—her mother died, leaving her father to grieve alone. So what good was it to love when it would always be accompanied by loss? No, she realized, at the end of the day, those were just idealistic dreams; she could learn to forgo all of that. If everything in this world was temporary, then perhaps it wasn't happiness that she sought but contentment. If she could at least live her life honestly believing and justifying her actions, if she were always true to herself, then she'd never have regrets. She'd never look back and wonder 'what if'. What if she chose differently? What if she chose love? What if she never compromised, never took the middle path, never gave up her search for happiness?

It was important right then that she not lie to herself, that she take time to realize what her instincts told her to do. Love could be trained, love could become a habit, but most importantly, what she needed to figure out was, could she learn to respect

and honour Bidyut? If she couldn't do that, then their marriage would be a failure and she would never be able to share her life with someone she didn't hold in high esteem; to look him straight in the eye for the rest of her life without being ashamed.

What she needed was time and that was the only thing she was running out of. Every moment of one's life, she thought, was nothing but a preparation for the next step. Each day that the sun set far out in the fields as her father recited Tulsidas's poems to her, each birthday that came and went, each new moon that slowly shrank in size as the nights passed, all led up to just one moment, that moment, that crucial day. And each chime of the bell as the priest completed the evening anjali, each thump of the tabla, the connection of the drummer's hand with the smooth black top, was a dramatic countdown of her days at Mani House and with her beloved Som. And as the ragas for the day came to an end, she realized she had one day less to make her decision.

Madhu got up to get some water. She had to go inside the main house and compose herself. Her father looked at her, silently questioning. 'I'll be right back,' she whispered and walked away. She entered the main house, holding up her sari so as not to trip on it while climbing the wide staircases, her hips shifting from side to side as her anklets jingled in a high pitch.

'Wait!' someone called out to her from behind in a loud whisper. She turned around. It was Som. 'I've been trying to get a moment alone with you all evening. But it seems impossible,' he said.

'We both have obligations it seems,' she said sadly.

Som followed her into the privacy of the house. Even the servants were mostly outside. All evening he had been wishing for this—just a few moments alone with her; just a few moments to hold her in his eyes, to look at her up close, to be engulfed just by her aura. He didn't need the physical contact, he didn't need tender kisses. Sometimes, just her presence was enough. He stretched out his hand to stroke her arm, to instinctively draw her closer, but froze midway.

'Have you been enjoying the performance?' he asked.

'Yes, it was beautiful. This whole Puja is breathtaking. I've never seen anything so magnificent,' said Madhu.

'Who's Bidyut to you?' asked Som, interrupting her.

Madhu's chest pounded. He had asked the dreaded question and she couldn't lie. Not to him. 'He's my future husband,' she replied.

A servant was approaching and frazzled by the entire situation, she hurriedly turned around and walked away. Som stood speechless as he watched her walk down the long corridor, leading into the inner part of the house.

Once the music was over and they all made their way for dinner, Chandan pulled Madhu aside. 'So what do you think of Bidyut?' he enquired anxiously.

'He seems very nice,' lied Madhu.

'I was thinking, perhaps if things go well this week,' said Chandan hopefully, 'that we can have a December wedding?'

'Father, I have a favour to ask,' replied Madhu. 'I'm still young, I have a lot to see and learn. Getting married would mean surrendering to domesticity, to forever play the role of wife and mother. I would have to give up thinking of you and myself and focus on a whole new family. I'm sure I would be ready to do that eventually but before I commit to a completely new life, I would like to spend some more time with you—creating an album of precious memories. I'd like to travel with you—perhaps even to Calcutta. Would you take me there? Just once?'

'To Calcutta? You want to go all the way there?' said Chandan. 'Very well. It will be my last gift to you—our last days together on a most memorable trip. To Calcutta I shall take you.'

Madhu didn't see Som the rest of the evening. She grew tired and went back early to her room, long before the guests had starting ebbing away from the gardens, back to their own rooms—the ones who were staying at the mansion—and the rest, back to their own homes. The young moon sprayed its light through her bedroom windows and exhausted, Madhu fell asleep.

Since the main ceremonies wouldn't begin till Ashtami, the eighth day, the pomp and fervour of the Puja somewhat died down over the next few days. As most of the guests drained away for the remainder of the week, everything at Mani House continued in a droning, sterile and perfunctory manner. The priests continued the customary rites every morning, and the attendees were mostly Kamala Debi, Minakshi and

Bini who oversaw the ceremonies and were cooped in the temple from morning till evening, fussing over the food to be offered to the Goddess—five types of grains, five products from cow's milk, ghee, honey, sugar and oil; ensuring that the fruits were cut just right, the flowers fresh and the holy water always flowing. The men disappeared during the day, hiding in their rooms, congregating in the living room with a hookah and discussing the increasing restlessness in Calcutta and amongst the local farmers.

Madhu joined the other women in the temple the first two days, sitting at the back in a corner by herself. She would watch in silence as the priest lifted plates of food, circling them around Durga, tossing delicately fragrant white flowers, sprinkling holy water, and muttering chants under his breath. Sometimes they were asked to join in the recitations, sometimes to cradle flowers and leaves in their palms, cupping them as they repeated hymns after the priest and then offering them to the Goddess, casually tossing them towards her feet as the entire floor became a bed of flowers and food, mingled with their prayers. And at the end of each day, when the puja was completed, the priest would offer the evening arti with burning incense, a peacock fan, and lighted lamps. Smoke billowed through the air, making Madhu's eyes tear as the priest circled Durga with the lighted wick with his right hand as he rang a bell with his left.

On several occasions she unsuccessfully attempted to connect with Kamala Debi, to try and sweet-talk

her and gain entry into the heart of the lady of the house and Som's mother. 'Truly, Kamala Debi, these hibiscus are magnificent,' she would say, in a futile attempt at conversation, then almost wishing in vain that she could have taken her words back and said something more intelligent, more substantial.

'Yes, well our gardeners are very skilled,' would be the reply, in her typical cold, haughty tone. And then, silence would follow.

Few could penetrate Kamala Debi's barriers, just as Bini had warned her before. But Madhu felt she would keep trying till she succeeded. The second day, she had tried admiring Minakshi's sari but the other woman simply stared her down, raising her eyebrows, twisting her face. 'You couldn't have seen very many of these in your part of the world,' Minakshi had said, making Madhu feel the size of an ant, crawling through the blades of grass, underneath the rose bushes, that shimmered in the evening water sprinkled by the gardeners. After the first two days of the Puja, Madhu stopped going into the temple, meeting the rest of the family only during meals. Bini would come over in the evenings and the two would walk through the gardens, getting acquainted with each other. Bini would tell Madhu all about the latest trends in Calcutta. How the women wore puffed sleeves and lace and learned to play the piano. Madhu would be amazed at their sophistication.

On the third morning, an all-day outing had been organized. 'You have to come,' Bini told Madhu, who by then had given up trying to befriend anyone

else from the Mallick family. 'Be ready by ten. We'll have three carriages going. My uncle and aunt have decided not to go so it's just us: Minakshi, Shyamali, you, my two brothers, and me.'

At the mention of Som, Madhu perked up. She hadn't had a chance in the last two days to spend any time with him alone. Not since the night of the recital had she had a private moment with him. 'All right! You've convinced me. I'll come,' she said, beaming.

But the next morning, while Madhu was getting ready, Shyamali knocked on her door. She slowly walked in, glancing around the room cautiously before her eyes narrowed in on Madhu. 'I've been told to let you know that we're running a little late. Minakshi isn't feeling well. So we'll only be setting off around noon,' she informed her and left.

Madhu picked up a book and lay down on her bed to read. But reading was the farthest thing on her mind, which kept waiting for the rest of the day to begin. Finally, exasperated, she put the book down, unbolted her door and went outside to the gardens. Mani House seemed strangely quiet, as if she were the only guest in the mansions. 'Where is everyone?' she enquired of one of the servants.

'Didi, they've all gone, they left early this morning.'

'Early? Weren't they supposed to leave at noon?'

'No, didi, they decided to leave earlier. They left by nine.'

'I see,' said Madhu, slowly. She wasn't sure what to think. Had she misunderstood Shyamali? Confused

and angry, she shut herself up in the room all day, reading her book. When at last, in the late afternoon, she heard the carriages rolling back in, she opened her windows to look outside. Som was standing below, looking up at her. Feeling betrayed, she moved back into the shadows of the room, so he couldn't catch a glimpse of her.

She heard footsteps approaching and quickly ran to her bed, picking up her book again. It was Bini.

'My dear, hope you're feeling better. Although you certainly don't look like you're unwell,' she gushed.

'I'm feeling fine,' said Madhu, surprised. 'How else should I be feeling?'

Bini looked at her in a funny way. 'Shyamali said you weren't feeling well this morning, which is why we didn't disturb you and thought you should get some rest instead of being out in the sun all day.'

Madhu didn't know what to say. 'I think there must have been a misunderstanding,' she replied. 'There's nothing wrong with me.'

'I can see that!' said Bini, slowly. Muttering something to herself, her face wrinkled in confusion, she slowly turned to leave, then turned back around again. 'Are you sure you didn't tell Shyamali that you didn't want to go out with us this morning?'

'I'm quite sure,' Madhu said, not wanting to implicate anyone.

That evening at dinner, Madhu remained quiet while Shyamali and Minakshi laughed and recounted all that she had missed. 'Oh, you should have been there to hear our Som sing! It was unbearable!'

'Although you know how shy he is. Perhaps if a stranger had been there, he wouldn't have. Took all of my skills to convince him,' said Shyamali. 'Still, it's such a pity you couldn't come,' she continued, looking challengingly at her. But Madhu didn't retaliate. She realized that the morning incident had been a clear and direct message to her to stay out of her way. What was the point of creating more trouble anyway? 'Yes, such a pity,' she replied. She could sense Bini looking at her but she avoided the other woman's gaze. As she was about to return to her room, Som caught up with her. 'I don't know why you're avoiding me,' he said softly, so that no one else would hear.

Madhu inched away from him. 'I'm not avoiding you,' she whispered back.

'Then what would you say it was? Ever since the night of the recital, whenever I've seen you, if I've seen you at all, you've behaved so strangely. As if you didn't know me at all.'

'I don't know why it matters so much to you when there are plenty of other women around here who seem to want to know you very well indeed!' said Madhu, briskly walking away.

The first seven days of Durga Puja passed by without Madhu even realizing it. Ashtami, the eighth day, was the advent of the end of the Puja, beginning with Sandhi Puja, which was performed at the cusp of the eighth and ninth days. That day on Ashtami,

Madhu woke up late, unsure at first where she even was, as she first opened her eyes to be greeted by the unfamiliarity of a room that wasn't hers; furniture that she didn't recognize. It was like being in a dream—where reality merged with imagination. She got dressed, in one of the new saris gifted by her father—a simple white, black, and red cotton cheli sari, her hair braided in two plaits and then twisted into a bun; her hands glistened with white bangles and the same thin gold chain she had worn the night before. There was a knock on her door. Thinking it was Bini, she didn't hesitate to call out, 'Come in.' It wasn't Bini who walked in though, it was Som.

Dressed in a white cotton kurta and neatly pleated dhoti, sleeves rolled up to show half of his strong arms, his hair combed back to expose his wide forehead, his eyes drained of life, darker than Madhu ever remembered, as if he'd been sleep deprived.

'I haven't been able to sleep all night. I've been tormented the whole time by the thought of you marrying that Bidyut,' he said. 'It's unthinkable. You can't let it happen.'

'But Som, you knew this was going to happen. What difference does it make now? You're just jealous now that you know who it is and the future is all the more real. But what's really changed? Nothing. Our lives are still on the same course as they were. They were fated to intersect, but perhaps only briefly crossing paths, before continuing on opposite journeys. We'll never be on the same track, it wasn't meant to be,' said Madhu.

'Yes, but there's something about him that I don't trust,' argued Som.

Madhu laughed. 'So what? You don't trust him and I have to call off the wedding? And then what? You'll marry me?'

Som didn't say anything. 'You don't understand,' she continued. 'I don't have a choice. I can't go against my father. Would you turn against your father? Would you dare to tell him that the life he's chosen for you is not the one you want? Would you dare to be disinherited and make your own living in this world? Are you strong enough to do that?'

'That's not strength, Madhu, that's just irresponsibility,' said Som.

'Well, then, it's also irresponsible for us to hope for anything from each other. It's irresponsible to encourage this any further. And it's irresponsible of you to come here like this. Anyone could walk in right now and see you here.'

'This isn't how I wanted things to turn out, Madhu. I thought you would understand...' he broke off, his voice trailing. He realized she was right, it was futile. What was he even doing there that morning? He'd woken up in a maddening rage, and all he could think of was to see her, to shake her to her senses and make her realize the terrible mistake she'd be making by marrying Bidyut. But how could he expect her to listen to him when he couldn't give her the very thing she needed—himself? He fought against all his instincts that wanted him to reach out and touch her, clasping his hands behind his back to control them. He

turned around and walked out of the room. If only he was not a Mallick, if only she was not Chandan Lal's daughter; if only he could do what he wished, never having to think of consequences; if only life could be simpler. If only...if only...

Madhu flung herself on to her bed. A deep urge to cry formed in her belly but somehow got stuck at her throat, unable to escape. She did not see Som for the rest of the day, keeping mostly to herself. Most of the family was busy with preparations for the Sandhi Puja. All the guests would be arriving that evening and Mani House would once again be brimming with life. Bidyut would be amongst those guests and Madhu winced at the thought of having to meet him again.

That evening, as she made her way to the temple, she walked through the lawns, along the dark edges of the bushes, away from the rest of the crowd, trying desperately to avoid bumping into Bidyut for as long as she could although she knew the encounter was inevitable. As she slid past the shadows, she saw Shyamali tugging Som by the hand—cajoling him, purring in a high-pitched silvery voice that trailed like the pallu of her sari. As she spotted Madhu from the corner of her eye, she turned Som around—her wispy sari slipping down from her shoulders to expose her cleavage. 'Oops,' she giggled as she covered herself, pulling him near her. 'Take me to the mandir, Som. The ceremony must be almost over.'

That tramp! Madhu thought, irritably. If *that* was his type, then she never stood a chance anyway and

maybe, they just weren't meant to be, because *that*—that ears dangling, hands jingling, bust-protruding tramp was not something she aspired to be. And what bothered her even more was that he seemed to be responding to her; as if she was his legitimate lover, the one he could openly and shamelessly display in public, while Madhu would remain his paramour; his secret, enveloped in the darkness of the night, when truth slept innocently. He seemed only too content to play different roles under the sun and the moon—each light casting a different type of shadow.

Gopaldas Mallick intercepted Som as he walked into the temple with Shyamali. 'I need to talk to you,' he said grimly, pulling his son by the arm. They walked around to the back, where no one could listen in, not knowing that Madhu was nearby. 'Som, I do not want to interfere in your personal matters, but I don't think I can be silent any more. I know what you have been doing behind my back. I trusted you implicitly but you have let me down.' Gopaldas confessed that some nights before, a servant had spotted him with Madhu, walking back from the lakes well past midnight. Som didn't say a word in his defence and his father continued. 'What do you think you are doing? Things have been going well between Narendranath Barman and me. You are already aware of the fact that we have chosen Shyamali to be your bride. She is perfect for you, my son: attractive, smart, and from the same social class as us. His estate is vast—perhaps second in these parts only to us. Shyamali is his only daughter.

Think of the consequences of an alliance. Think of what this could mean for us. I cannot have you whiling away your time with that girl Madhu and spoiling everything! You have to put an end to this immediately.'

Madhu was on her way into the temple, to catch the very end of the ceremony—when prayers and flowers are offered to the Goddess. She recognized Gopaldas's voice speaking in hushed tones. She didn't mean to pry into his conversation but her sari had got caught in the bushes and as she tried to carefully untangle it, she couldn't help overhearing.

Unaware, Gopaldas went on. 'It is a good match, Som; one that would mean a lot to both of us. Just think about it practically. Madhu is a sweet child. Her father is a good man. But, it's merely an infatuation. There can be no benefits from such a union—passion is exciting but it doesn't last. You have to know what your obligations are.'

'And what if I choose not to fulfil my duties? What if I choose another path?' asked Som.

'When I was your age, Som, I never had that choice. It is up to you if today you think you do...' And Gopaldas walked away.

Madhu bit her lips, trying to prevent the tears that had now formed at the corners of her eyes. *Don't cry, don't cry*, she silently begged herself. The ceremony was now almost at the end and the women had begun blowing their conch shells. The smoke from the fire and the incense rose up in the air in spirals, prickling her. Madhu closed her eyes and prayed.

She prayed for courage; for strength to know what she should do. She prayed to learn to differentiate between right and wrong, between duty and desire. She prayed for her father who had devoted his entire life to her; and she was throwing all that away for a meaningless passion that, as Gopaldas Mallick rightfully said, could surely never last! Sitting in the temple of Mani House, Madhu silently prayed to Durga; she prayed to Shakti; she prayed to her mother who was now looking down at her from the heavens above, beseeching her to show her the path. *Give me courage to do the right thing*, she silently begged. *Mother, I wish you were here to tell me what to do. I need to know what I must do.*

The priest chimed the bell, signalling the end of prayers for that day. Tomorrow would be the last day of the Pujas, the ninth day, after which was the Bhashan, the day the Goddess would be immersed into the river. She would return to Her home with Her husband Shiva and Madhu, back to Radhanagar. Madhu stared at the statue of the Mother Goddess—ten hands stretched out, perched on her mount, triumphant at the slaying of the demon Mahishasur. She was force, power, love, and kindness; she was the earth; she was maya who had cast her spell over Madhu, enchanting her, bewitching her. But now the maya had ended. The Goddess would return and with Her, the magic that had surrounded the two lovers over the past few days would be gone too. It was done, she had seen it through till the end—this was the end for Som and her. This was the beginning of

her life with Bidyut—and Som's with Shyamali, or whomever duty would bind him to.

'Father,' she whispered to Chandan, softly so that no one else would hear. 'I want to go back home to Radhanagar.'

Chandan looked at his daughter puzzled. 'Now? Before the tenth day? Before the Bhashan? We've come such a long way, why not stay?'

'Please don't ask me too many questions. Please, just trust me when I say I don't feel well and I need to be back home. I can't say more than that,' begged Madhu.

Chandan sighed. He knew Madhu well enough to trust her. She wasn't impulsive and spontaneous and obviously something must be bothering her greatly for her to want to return so suddenly. But he was also too awkward and uncomfortable to question her further, in fear of knowing too much. There were things that a father shouldn't know. 'Very well, child,' he conceded, 'we'll leave first thing tomorrow morning.'

CHAPTER FIVE

'WHAT ARE YOU TALKING about? You can't leave so soon, Chandan,' said the zamindar when he was informed that they would be leaving later that evening.

'What to do, Mallick-babu, an urgent matter of business has come up and I have to be home,' lied Chandan.

'Why don't you at least leave Madhu behind? I'm sure she'd love to stay and see the rest of the Pujas and she is getting along so well with Bini,' said Gopaldas.

After much cajoling, Chandan finally managed to convince Gopaldas. Ever the gentleman, he promised he would have his carriage ready before sunset so they could be well on their way before dark.

Gopaldas would miss Chandan's company amongst the men, as they gathered each evening—discussing literature, music, and politics. His other guests were quick to share their thoughts but few were as poignant and while they added heat to the wonderful evenings filled with passionate arguments, it was towards Chandan that they would turn, at the end—usually sitting quietly, listening, till his opinion was asked. It also made him realize there was so much more he wanted for his own son—who

although he had finished his higher education, still had so much more to learn. For one, there was that whole business with that girl—Chandan's daughter. Gopaldas suspected that their abrupt departure had something to do with Madhu's budding romance with his son and although he was sad to lose Chandan's company, he was secretly thankful that his daughter would no longer be a distraction for Som. He wasn't angry when a servant had informed him of Som's secret midnight meeting with the girl. In fact, he had quietly laughed to himself. It was one thing to act out in a way a true man was supposed to—to explore life—it was his right. But Gopaldas knew his son didn't do anything light-heartedly and that such a tryst could only lead to something more serious and undesirable.

Som was smart but like most young men of the time, had flighty and romantic notions of what the world should be and what his role in it was. Gone were the days when duty and family were everything. Gopaldas worried that though on the one hand more education was perhaps what his son needed, on the other hand, he was already beginning to question too much; this secret meeting with Madhu was not just a betrayal of family but it showed his daring spirit in challenging authority, in risking everything for his beliefs. Would more texts and books alleviate that problem or further enhance it? He smiled to himself—Som was after all his son. And he too had been considered rebellious for his time. Maybe that's what his son needed—time. Time would solve

everything, he thought, as he walked away, into the antarmahal, to find his wife.

Kamala Debi looked at Gopaldas suspiciously when she learned of Chandan's hasty departure. 'Good,' she said, while folding her clothes, keeping them away in the tall, polished oak armoire. 'To tell you the truth, I didn't like that father–daughter duo one bit.'

'Kamala, come now, Chandan is a delightful man,' Gopaldas tried to convince his wife.

Kamala Debi just shrugged and turned away, fixing the end of her sari over her head defiantly—as if challenging her husband's opinion. 'Did you have a talk with that son of yours like you had promised?' she asked. When Gopaldas meekly informed her that he had, she said, 'And? Did it help?'

Gopaldas sighed. 'I don't know. I told him what we expected and I told him what's for the best. Now the rest is up to him, isn't it?'

'If you leave all the big decisions to him, he'll be loitering around like some vagabond for the rest of his life. You're his father, you're supposed to give him direction and lead him the right way. You give him too much choice. Choice isn't good for someone so young. They don't know what to do with it,' said Kamala Debi.

'But we also have to allow him to make his own mistakes, Kamala, otherwise how will he become a man? Maybe we've been too protective with him, maybe he needs some freedom from us. I've been thinking, he should go away to Calcutta for some time. It may do him good,' said the zamindar.

Madhu didn't tell Bini that she was leaving that day. She avoided meeting anyone and since most of the people were busy with the Puja, now on its ninth day known as Nabami, nearing the end which would culminate in the Bhashan, she managed to remain unobserved. As evening approached, their luggage was loaded into the carriage that was waiting for them and Madhu, along with her father, quietly climbed into it and slipped out into the shadows of Panchkula, unnoticed. The red-tinged mud of Bengal that had brought her here, now carried Madhu back home to her haven, helping her forget everything she wanted to erase from her mind. It was all so picturesque—the spotless sky, turning into a light shade of orange, the dark silhouette of palm trees against it; the soft evening breeze lightly beginning its dance—it was the simple village beauty that lifted her spirits, and brought with it a sense of clarity.

Chandan wanted to ask Madhu what he should tell Dwijendra. An answer was expected, or rather, a date which would act as a confirmation of the betrothal. But he knew better than to cajole her right then. Madhu was distracted, unusually quiet. Typically a journey with her would be peppered with endless questions but today she just gazed out of the window, and her thoughts seemed to be carried off into the distance as the carriage rolled on. At times like this, he wished she had a mother, someone she could have confided in.

It was only when they came to a halt in front of their home that Madhu finally stopped holding her

breath and began to relax. Somehow the gravity of the situation seemed not so important any more, so far away from Som. It was almost like the last few days had never happened. Not that she'd already forgotten but that the feeling was no longer immediate, the impact not so harsh. It was just a dull ache, one that she thought she could bear to live with. But she also realized another thing—that she couldn't marry Bidyut. She would be lying to herself if she said she could learn to love him. Now that she had met Som—no matter how briefly—she could never settle for anything less. That evening, as they sat down for dinner, Madhu blurted it out to her father. 'I can't marry Bidyut, Father,' she said.

Chandan had feared as much. Somehow this decision didn't surprise him. 'Don't you think you can think over this a little longer, maybe after we return from Calcutta?' he asked hopefully.

'We're going to Calcutta? Really?' said Madhu, her face lighting up like a thousand candles.

'Yes, well I thought...' Chandan's voice trailed off. 'I didn't tell you this earlier but I've had a teaching position offered to me at Presidency College. I had originally thought of declining the offer but now that things are different, perhaps it is the right time to say yes. But, Madhu, my dear daughter, if I keep this promise to you, then you too have one last promise to make for me.'

'Anything you wish,' she said.

'Promise me that you will still consider Bidyut. Take as much time as you wish. But don't write him

off just as yet. Dwijendra is a dear old friend of mine and I can't tell him so soon that your mind is already made up. Even if there was the slightest possibility, the slightest glimmer of hope, then I wouldn't have to tell him anything right now. Then you wouldn't be shattering the dreams of two foolish old friends,' said her father.

Madhu laughed. 'Very well. I won't say no, just as yet. But you know me, Father, once my mind is made up, it rarely changes.'

'You never know, Madhu, you never know. And that's all I want from you—just the promise to acknowledge that things could change. If after a few months, when we return from Calcutta, you still feel the same way, I won't badger you any more. But for now, don't be so adamant.'

Chandan wrote to the college and accepted the position. It was a coveted position and once Madhu was married and he was all alone, it would be an opportunity that would help advance whatever would be left of his career at that age. When his daughter would finally leave, permanently, to make a home somewhere else, then living alone in that empty house, in a tiny, sleepy village, may not be the best situation for him. He had planned on moving to Calcutta. This would be an early test to see if he could adjust to the city life. Mr Roy, principal of Presidency College—the oldest and most reputable institution in the country—responded within weeks. They would expect him by the beginning of January. 'By then,' the principal had replied in his offer letter,

'we would have found a suitable residence for you and your daughter and even a servant. We look forward to receiving you and are honoured that you have decided to accept this post.'

'Did you read that, Madhu?' said Chandan, excitedly. 'They are honoured! And we will have a servant! You won't have to cook or clean or do any domestic chores.'

'What would I do all day then?' worried Madhu, who had never had the luxury of being the mistress of a house.

'Why, you would walk around the city, you could explore the sites. You would visit other people's homes, be their guests, sit side by side with English ladies and sip tea with them. Maybe, if you want, you could also take some classes at the college.'

But Madhu had other ideas of what she wanted to do in Calcutta. She had heard much of the city from Bini: where the best sweet shops near College Square were and where the best saris were sold. Madhu wondered what the streets of Calcutta were like—she feared getting lost in the labyrinthine alleys and streets that Bini had described. Radhanagar had only a handful of main roadways and besides, everyone knew everyone. But in Calcutta, in the vastness of the grandest city, the capital of Bengal and the British Raj, she would be a nonentity, like an ant—scurrying about, fearing that she may be crushed.

She envisioned the grand houses of the British officials and what it would be like to be invited to dinner by them. 'I even drank a glass of wine

once,' Bini had confided in Madhu. But the thought of alcohol and its effects scared Madhu and she wondered if they were ever to be invited to such a dinner, how she would refuse a glass of wine. She'd have to make up an excuse. Perhaps an allergy or an intolerance towards it. Would it be socially acceptable to refuse? What would she wear when she had no puffed sleeves? Would she be able to converse with them? Understand their accents?

January arrived sooner than she expected and with it, a new surge of vivacity in Madhu. They travelled to Calcutta by train which they caught from Bardhaman city. Madhu had never even been on a train before and the experience left her dumbfounded. The station was bustling with people—passengers rushing into compartments, coolies balancing the luggage on their heads, looking as if they might tip over any second but somehow in that precarious position managing to traverse the entire length of the station. There were women calling out to their children and men yelling out orders to the servants. There was smoke and dust and noise as trains entered the station, trumpeting their arrival.

Looking out of the window, as they left Bardhaman, everything seemed to speed by her—a hundred times faster than it did in a horse-drawn carriage. The mustard fields, the rice fields, the farmers, the children covered in dirt, the streets, a man pulling a cart—for a brief second they were there and then just as suddenly, they were gone. It was her life in fast forward, going somewhere else, a new destination,

a new beginning—and her heart rattled along with the train on the tracks, heading straight to Howrah Station in Calcutta. On their arrival, they were met by Mr Majumdar—an administrator at Presidency College—who escorted them into a large carriage which was waiting outside.

They jostled past people, carts, and carriages as each struggled for its own space on the ever-crowded streets of Calcutta. Madhu was amazed for she could never envisage such madness. It was almost dizzying. They were carried through wide roads, teeming with people, animals, dirt and noise, to Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road, where through a small alleyway that opened out into a large courtyard, they were led to their new temporary home. 'The city of courtyards,' said Mr Majumdar. And it was true, Madhu would soon discover, especially in the northern part which was a maze of small little corridors that widened into larger worlds hidden inside—glorious zamindari mansions, palaces belonging to old rajas, opulent British residences, they were all little cities within cities, shimmering in mirrors, stained glass, carved balconies, and newly painted wooden shutters.

Chandan Lal and Madhu were given a large, three-bedroom house as accommodation and Hari, a middle-aged man from the Malda district, would be their servant for the duration of their stay. Madhu gaped as they entered No. 10, Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road—a two-storeyed house with a yellow stone façade and green painted shutters. Madhu ran up the stairs, her hands tracing the railing, admiring

the marble floor, which felt so cool against her bare feet. Peering down over the railing, Madhu yelled out, 'Father, this is gorgeous! I can't believe we'll be living here!'

'And shortly after your arrival, I will be hosting a big celebration for the anniversary of the college. It would be perfect for you'd have the opportunity to meet the entire faculty and other noteworthy Calcuttans,' Mr Roy had told Chandan.

When Chandan told Madhu that he'd like her to attend the function as well, she was appalled. 'I'll most likely be the only woman there!' she exclaimed.

'Madhu, you forget we are not in the back roads of Bengal, this is Calcutta—the capital. This is where modernity begins. You'll soon see how progressive the women of the city are and trust me, if I thought it would be in poor taste for you to be seen out at a gathering full of men, I wouldn't suggest it,' Chandan assured his daughter.

The first few days in Calcutta went by fast, with the chaos that typically accompanied moving to a new place: becoming acquainted with new markets, new people, new smells, and the unfamiliar sounds of a new house; even getting used to the idea that instead of cooking the meals, she only had to decide the menu. It was overwhelming, but Madhu welcomed it for it distracted her and she hadn't thought of Som or those few days in Mani House in a long time. How strange it seemed now that all that had ever happened—the midnight rendezvous, the kiss, the secrecy, the shame, the exhilaration—it didn't even

feel like a dream any more because dreams sometimes felt even more real than reality. But there was nothing real about Som or Mani House. There was no more prickling of her skin at the very thought of him. No, it felt more like a book she had read a long time ago—where Som, Shyamali, Bini were all characters. And the book had long ended and although the story gripped her, she was soon beginning to forget how enthralling it had been.

One evening, about a week after they had arrived, Madhu's father returned home in the evening to say that they would be having guests the following day. 'There will be about eight people coming back home with me tomorrow evening and you have to play the hostess,' he warned her. Eight! Madhu was perturbed. She'd never hosted more than an aunt here or an uncle there, and of course, that one time when Som had unexpectedly arrived at their doorstep in Radhanagar. She spent most of the next day running about, making sure Hari had cleaned the floors and bought enough food from the market. She personally made a trip to the sweet shop that she had heard so much of at Mani House—where supposedly the best sandesh came from. She tidied the sitting room, dusted the cushions, and by five in the evening, close to the time her father usually returned home, she was ready: wearing a special sari, although not too ornate so as to look like she was attending a wedding. The pleats in place, her hair gathered in a coil behind her, nestling at the base of her neck, smoothened and glistening, her eyes traced

in black, darker and more alluring than normal. She would go over to the balcony each time she heard a noise outside. Finally, by the time they did arrive, she was close to dozing off. *How typically late*, she thought irritably.

She heard them entering the drawing room and eagerly ran into the kitchen to oversee Hari's preparations. Giving the guests some time to themselves, she waited appropriately before entering the room with Hari following behind her with the food. Chandàn beamed as she approached. 'My only daughter—Madhu,' he said proudly, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her into the centre of the room where she was clearly visible to all the guests. All she initially saw was a group of men and Madhu looked down in embarrassment at first, before having the courage to look up to greet the guests face to face. As her eyes perused each guest one by one, from left to right, she paused as they met a familiar face—and her heart almost stopped. She stood transfixed as if she'd seen a ghost, her face losing all its colour, her lips narrowing their smile and her eye widening in disbelif, for standing before her, confidently, so self-assuredly, dressed all in white with a dark shawl draped over his body, was none other than Som.

She tried to avoid his eyes, tried to pretend that his presence was of little consequence to her, but all the while she couldn't help fearing that her face gave away the panic that she felt in each nerve of her body. Som, meanwhile, did not seem to be as affected

by her. He greeted her warmly, 'How are you?' he enquired politely and she, unable to think or speak much, managed to stammer, 'I'm fine, thank you. It's such an unexpected surprise.'

'I happen to be taking a course at Presidency College myself since last month and yes, it was indeed the most pleasant coincidence to see none other than Chandan-babu walk into the building.'

Chandan interrupted them, leading her away and she was secretly thankful that he had rescued her from that awkward predicament. 'I'd like you to meet the others too, Madhu, don't play partial, before giving the others a turn,' he said, making her blush as he introduced her to Mr Roy, the principal of the college; to Mr Bose, a talented young scientist who had just returned from his studies in England and started his professorship at the college; to Bipin Das and Sudhamoy Datta—two young students who had just received a special scholarship, awarded to only twenty-five elite students. Madhu learned that Som too, was one of the twenty-five esteemed scholars to win the scholarship.

'Well, I will leave you gentleman to your scholarly conversations,' she said, thankful for once in her life that she had duties in the kitchen.

She wasn't sure how she felt about seeing Som after all this time. That same excitement which bubbled from within all those months back, still threatened to erupt. She realized that in all the months that had passed, she may have forgotten that face—those eyes that looked deeply into her, those lips that were once

hers, those arms that she so comfortably fit into, the square shoulders—yes, she had forgotten them all. But what she hadn't forgotten was the way she had felt when she was with him; that shiver up her spine as his gaze fell on her body, knowing he was admiring it, knowing he was observing her every move; that intense scrutiny with which he watched her speak, listened to her trying to make sense when in actuality, in his presence, she seemed to lose all sense of logic. No, Madhu realized she hadn't forgotten the effect he had on her after all. All those feelings had just been latent and now—seeing him after she had long stopped counting the days, long since she had stopped staring up at the stars and making silent wishes—they resurfaced. And that is why she had to escape that room; she had to extricate herself from his presence, to extinguish any spark that would ignite, before it became a burning flame.

Madhu didn't dare enter the room again while Som and the other men were still in the house. Although she was in there for all of ten minutes at the most, the moment kept replaying in her mind over and over again. Was he really as indifferent to her as he looked? Did her presence fluster him just as his had done her? Perhaps she had been too cold, perhaps she should have spent a few more minutes talking to him, instead of leaving abruptly. Perhaps she was the one who had seemed unaffected in the end. It was only when she heard their voices below and peering through the balcony, saw them leave, that she finally exited the kitchen.

'You didn't tell me that Gopaldas Mallick's son was going to be here tonight,' she said to her father carefully, in case he suspected too much.

'Oh, I forgot, yes, well he's a student at the college now and he's taking one of my classes. Imagine that! After all these years, to be teaching young Som again. Life surely does come around to a full circle. You will probably be seeing him here from time to time.'

Great! Madhu thought. Here she was, under the impression that she was escaping to Calcutta to forget all about him but instead, all it did was bring her straight back to him. Circle indeed. It was a vicious circle from which she craved an escape. *I guess there's no running away from things,* she sighed to herself. Who knows, maybe he had already got engaged to Shyamali and forgotten all about her. He hadn't seemed surprised to see her that evening and had spoken casually and calmly, as if nothing had ever happened between the two of them. Perhaps all the tumult was only in her head. But whatever it was, suddenly this trip to Calcutta was becoming more than it had promised to be. There was a new adventure lurking around the corner and Madhu was ashamed to admit that she thoroughly welcomed it.

The next day Madhu was idling in her bed, on a cool winter afternoon under the faint, late January sun, when Hari knocked on her door. 'There's someone to see you,' he said.

'Who?' she asked, annoyed that he had interrupted her in the middle of her reading, when she was just getting to the climax of the novel.

'A Babu,' replied Hari, wringing his hands around a red cloth that hung like a scarf around his neck. 'He asked if you were home. He is waiting in the living room for you.'

'Tell him I'm coming,' she said getting up. She didn't know anyone personally in the city so far. Perhaps it was someone from Radhanagar, bearing bad news. She straightened up in front of the mirror, tying her hair quickly into a careless braid, smoothening out her simple blue cotton sari that was crushed from lying down. The material clung to her figure, wrapping around her hips and giving her a more feminine shape. It was getting cold, she thought as she shivered and wrapped a light paisley shawl around her shoulders. Approaching the living room, she slowly parted the curtains that hung on the doorway and just as her eyes rested on the visitor, the person turned around to face her.

'Don't worry, I didn't come here specifically to see you,' said Som, smiling, as if reading her mind. 'I was passing by the area and your father asked me to drop some papers off for him.'

Madhu stood there, speechless. Seeing him before her—his chiselled face, his dark, thick hair swept back, his hands, clenched in tight fists, held by his sides, his soft, intense eyes that now looked fixedly at her—it all seemed to return, like the waves of high tide, crashing into the land, roaring and thundering as they struck the walls of a dam, all those feelings, the memories of their intimacy, came charging back. More than ever, she was completely disconcerted in

his presence, but fought desperately to hide it. God help her if she let him see how he affected her. She'd never give him that satisfaction.

He was dressed in western clothes, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and grey trousers held with a thin belt around his waist. She couldn't help but admire how becoming he looked, how modern and stylish, and thought what a mismatch she must seem beside him. His hair was longer than it had been in Panchkula, as if he didn't have the time or inclination to properly groom himself. His face was unshaven, looking shadowed in the few-day-old stubble, making him look older and more masculine than she'd remembered. So she had been wrong, he had to have been affected by seeing her again, otherwise why would he return?

Seeing her hesitating, Som stepped forward and held her by the shoulders. 'It's really good to see you after so long, Madhu,' he said.

'Is it?' she managed to say, her voice faltering nervously but she firmed herself to hide the inner vulnerability.

'I've thought of you a lot since you suddenly left our house,' he said. Madhu waited silently and he continued. 'I didn't know at first that you'd left. No one told me. I didn't find out till the next day, or else I'd have done all I could to stop you from leaving.' He waited for Madhu to say something in her own defence; to explain why she had left so abruptly. There had to be a reason, some sort of a plausible explanation for such a rash act that had

hounded him for months since. When Madhu still didn't speak, he grew impatient. 'Say something, Madhu. Tell me, what happened that day? What made you leave? Did something happen back home? Is everything all right?'

Madhu just looked away, shaking her head, trying hard to control the tears that now threatened to expose her vulnerability to him. She bit her lips and winced in pain. 'No,' she said quietly. 'No, nothing happened at home. Everything is fine.'

'Then what happened? Did your father make you leave?' Som asked.

'No, no, it was me, I wanted to leave,' admitted Madhu. 'Som, that evening when you saw me with Bidyut...meeting him that evening, and everything else that had happened in those few days at Mani House, made me realize I couldn't continue playing a game any more. Som, it was no longer fun for me. We both had decisions to make. I thought, by leaving, I would make it easier for both of us.'

'Madhu!' groaned Som. 'If only you had stayed back, you'd have known that the next day, I approached my father, and told him about us. My parents had been pushing for an alliance between Shyamali and me but it was politically driven. I told him that I couldn't marry her because my heart belonged to you. I suppose, by then, you had already left. I didn't know that at the time. I wanted to let him know that my mind was already made up and that I had to have you and after that, I had planned on asking you to marry me, no matter what my father's reaction was.

He was resistant of course and he said if I chose to marry you, my mother may never speak to me again. And then I learned that you and Chandan-babu had left, just like that, and in the blink of an eye, it was all gone—I was devastated. I wanted to leave immediately to go to Radhanagar, to see you, to find out what had happened, to convince you to return. But my father stopped me. He reminded me that it wasn't my place to chase after you when you'd obviously decided on leaving. He suggested that I come to Calcutta, study some more, to help me take my mind off things. And perhaps, that would make me see things more clearly—by giving us some distance. I agreed, only because I didn't know what else to do with myself. I desperately needed a change if I had to force myself to forget you. But, if anything, it made me think of you even more. I was miserable. Slowly, over time, I began to reconcile myself to the fact that perhaps my father was right—that it would've never worked out. And although I never stopped thinking of you, I became used to the fact that you'd never come back in my life. Everything seemed so dull, so pointless, but I was managing somehow. Life in Calcutta just became a routine—the classes during the day, the parties in the evening, the cricket games on Sundays, or maybe the races—they were all just a way of evading the night, when I'd return to my bed, back to reality and continue being haunted by your memory— it all became one mindless habit, and then, to see your father at the college, so unexpectedly, and then to see you here, last night—I said to myself that

it had to be a sign. That fate couldn't be so cruel as to make our paths cross like this, once more, only to take you away again. Madhu, you have to believe the same. You can't ignore this, you can't think this was a random accident.'

'I don't know, Som...' Madhu began but no sooner did the words escape her lips than Som cut her off. 'Madhu, it's up to us to decide what we want out of this, not our families. I'm willing to sacrifice what I need to for you, for us. I want to be with you. Besides, in the last few months, I've begun to realize that I'm not even that interested in succeeding my father, to rule over poor workers whose lives would depend on me. But what sort of a dependency is it? I would control them, I would govern them, just as we are all governed. They would continue to act as puppets—doing and thinking whatever I tell them is right. That is not what I aspire to do. I want to make changes, but I can't do it from Panchkula. Moving here, to the epicentre of all the political activity, I've begun to realize that the restlessness amongst the people is even more urgent. If I'm needed anywhere, it is here, if I can ever make a change, it is from here.'

'Change? What change do you want to bring about?' demanded Madhu.

'It's not just me, it's everyone here, all of us. All the people you saw last night at dinner and more! I don't want to sit around and maintain diplomacy like my father, I want to act, to voice my opinions, to make people aware that we have choices, that we have our own opinions, and minds, and that we

should be heard—to let the British know that they are only oppressing us,' said Som, his voice rising in excitement.

'So I'm going to be part of your grand scheme in rebelling against your father?' asked Madhu angrily. She realized that all this time, while she was under the impression that Som truly loved her, he was just trying to get back at his father. She had been nothing but the other half of a cause that he was fighting against. He was young and passionate and struggled between choices. Madhu was his liberation. Madhu was everything his family stood against—choosing Madhu was choosing freedom, free will, and independence. It wasn't her that he loved but the idea she represented. Even if he didn't realize this now, even if he genuinely meant every word that he said, it was the heart of it.

Madhu closed her eyes in exasperation but she relaxed and Som, sensing her ease, now dared to pull her close. 'Don't leave me again, Madhubati,' he whispered huskily into her hair. It took her all her will power to resist him, to push him away from her. But she knew it was for the best—for both of them.

'Som, you haven't been listening! I'm going to marry someone else,' she said. She felt horrible at having to lie to him but in this case, it would take a lie to set him free and she had to let him go.

'So that is it? You've made up your mind? You're going to marry that Bidyut just like that? You're just going to accept things without putting up a fight? If only you really knew him, I know you'd have second

thoughts. He's not who you think he is. He wouldn't even know where to begin to make you happy.'

'And you know how to make me happy? You think you really know me? Just from those few days we had known each other?' said Madhu, her voice rising.

'I know that the time we've spent together hasn't been significant, but what happened between us in that short time was special. You must have felt it too, Madhu. It wasn't how long you knew me, it was the way you did. The way that I saw you—I don't think anyone else can see you that way. I refuse to believe that there's anyone else out there who can see you through my eyes, especially not Bidyut. I know he works for my father but believe me, don't trust him. Don't trust a word he says.'

'It's the way it was meant to be, there's nothing you or I can do about it,' said Madhu, sadly.

'You can. You can rebel. But it's funny that you won't. You, who are so independent, so radical in many ways—climbing trees, bathing in the lake for the world to watch, but all said and done, you don't have the guts. You choose to conform at the end of the day. But I will wait, Madhu. I will wait as long as it takes,' he said, catching hold of her hands tightly in his and squeezing them.

Madhu was anxious that Som leave soon, scared that Hari might walk in any moment. 'You must go now,' she begged but just then, she heard her father's footsteps entering the house and his voice hollering for Hari. She left the room quickly, before Chandan had a chance to walk in on them. 'Father, you're

home! You have a visitor!' she said, trying to control her voice and act normally.

Chandan insisted that Som stay for dinner and much to Madhu's annoyance, he readily accepted.

'Tell me Master-babu,' Som said over their meal. 'What did you think of last night? Do you think it's possible? Have we won them over?'

'I absolutely think so,' said Chandan. 'I've even recruited a few more members and I believe we'll have some financial backing as well. I didn't tell the others this last night, but we will soon have two members of the reputed Tagore family on our side.'

'When should we start?' asked Som.

'From next week. We'll meet here, every Thursday evening at six. We'll have to keep it down. I don't want it to become too big. Not yet. No one is to know,' said Chandan.

'No one is to know what?' asked Madhu and when neither man volunteered any further information, she said, 'You have to let me know. You can't conduct something in secret under my nose and not tell me.'

Chandan and Som looked at each other. 'Well, we'll only tell you if you promise to join our cause,' said Som, smiling at her challengingly.

'You have to tell me what it is I'm consenting to join first,' said Madhu, staring back at him defiantly.

'The Presidency College Secret Society,' said Chandan. 'I didn't want to tell you before to alarm you, but that is also part of the reason why I decided to accept this position. They need someone to take charge, to form an organization that will be

bold enough to stand up to the government; to do something about the partition of Bengal that Lord Curzon has planned.'

'What do you plan to do?' asked Madhu, frightened at the thought of her father turning into a mutineer. 'You're going to learn how to use a revolver and go shoot people? You're going to fight? Protest? Liberate the Indians from the foreigners?'

'Don't be dramatic Madhu. Our fight will not be through violence but through wit. We will hold meetings periodically and we will write, we will educate the masses and show them that we've become pawns in the hands of the British and that we mustn't tolerate it. Of course, this too has its own perils in case the government finds out,' said Som.

'And if you die?' said Madhu, ignoring Som and looking directly at her father. 'If they kill you or arrest you? Then what will become of me?' she said, getting up and storming out of the room. 'Well then, I'll be here to take care of you,' Som called out from behind and she could just imagine the silly smirk on his face.

The next week, Mr Majumdar, whom she hadn't seen since her first day when he had come to receive them at Howrah Station, took her on a sightseeing tour of the city. What Madhu enjoyed most about Calcutta was the freedom it offered her. In Radhanagar, it was difficult to do anything without someone finding out, without being the topic of gossip. Here in Calcutta, she was inconspicuous and Mr Majumdar escorted Madhu all over the city: to the Shovabazar Rajbari,

the mansion of Raja Nabakrishna Deb, where the legendary Durga Pujas took place each year. The two-storey structure was made all in white and pink limestone, the courtyard covered in arches and pillars in colonial style and above each window, there were beautiful, detailed designs set in multicoloured glass and stone. She visited the beautiful pagoda inside Eden Gardens which had been brought to the city from Burma after the British defeated the country in the 1884 war; to Dakshineshwar at the banks of the River Hooghly, to see the Navaratna temple built by the late Rani Roshmoni Debi. Madhu was amazed at the vibrant streets that literally bustled with life and energy and an effervescence that was not seen in the villages. Calcutta was the centre of commerce, culture, politics, and business. It was hard to be in Calcutta and not feel her vitality. Every major street crossing had a policeman, dressed in khaki, a rifle slung on his shoulder, and carriages would go by with a British memsahib. Madhu stared at their refined clothing, the parasol hanging from their wrist, their odd-shaped hats with netted veils.

And yet, all that time, despite having so much distraction all around her, Madhu's thoughts were focused on the day the society would convene at their house again. Try as she might, she couldn't wait to see Som again. When Thursday came around, Madhu grew restless, knowing that they would be arriving in the evening. Although she told herself that she didn't care, she took extra care in getting dressed in a mint-green sari—one of the newer ones

her father had gifted to her that Puja. She anxiously reprimanded Hari for putting too much salt in the lentils and overcooking the rice. She paced the long hallway up and down till she heard the men's voices from the streets below, then hid in the kitchen as they stomped up the stairs, convening in the drawing room and shutting the door behind them.

The evening started off in hushed tones but by the end of the night, Madhu could hear loud, energetic voices, the pitch rising with each hour. Madhu left the men to themselves, for as long as she could. Finally, unable to stay away any longer, she poked her head in to ask if they needed anything. Although her brain told her to keep her focus on the others, her eyes seemed to have a mind of their own as they sought out Som, standing at the corner of the room, flipping through the pages of a book. As if by instinct, he seemed to know that she was looking at him and he looked up, silently acknowledging her. Hurriedly, she left the room, rushing down the long corridor towards her own room, half afraid, half thrilled as she tried to collect herself. Just the thought that he was there, so close by, under the same roof, that knowledge in itself was sufficient for her. But while the rest of the members were busy debating, Som slipped out, catching Madhu by the arm, halfway down the corridor.

'Let go! Someone will see us!' she whispered frantically.

'Not till you promise to meet me so that I can at least have a word with you,' said Som.

'We can't risk being seen!' she argued, wringing her hand away from his strong grasp and briskly walking away, her heart thudding violently. She ran into her bedroom, leaning against the door, breathing heavily. But Som pushed it from behind and she almost stumbled forward as he stormed in.

'You've lost your mind,' she muttered aloud.

'I have, but I had to see you alone. Just once, Madhu! Don't avoid me,' said Som, gripping her by the arms. She looked different from the Madhu he had known in Radhanagar; the one he had begun to know so intimately that one night by the lake in Mani House. When she had looked up at him and smiled back then, her face had sparkled like the waters of the Ganga on a crisp winter afternoon, beneath the crystal-blue skies but when she looked at him just as she was right now, with her dark mysterious eyes, her allure was quite different and her aura shone like a new moon against a spotless black night.

'Madhu!' he groaned, pulling her close and before she could retaliate, locking her mouth with his. After so long, once again he felt the warmth of her eagerly parting lips and the sweetness of her breath. Her eyes closed and her face looked up at him, silently begging to be kissed and touched. His tongue pushed in, completely claiming her mouth and his hands wandered below, pulling her in by the waist and sliding up, beneath the soft cotton, to find a pulsing, mound of flesh.

Madhu let out a soft moan. How she had longed for those searching fingers on her skin; how every

fibre of her being had been on fire, thinking back to their last night of passion in the Mani House gardens. Som kissed her behind the ears, his lips caressed her neck, venturing downwards and just then she managed to regain some self-control.

'Please!' begged Madhu. 'It's useless, Som. There's no future for us, you know it.'

'I think you are right,' Som said hoarsely. 'You were always right—there can never be anything between us, we are divided by far too many hurdles. Especially now, with the work I have undertaken. They, the society, need me and I can't let them down. I can't waste my time on anything else when the fate of our country is at stake. I just wanted one last word with you, to wish you luck for your future. I hope we'll meet again,' said Som as he stared deeply into her eyes. Then, without saying another word, he walked out, closing the door behind him. Tears trickled down Madhu's face as she realized that it was possibly the last encounter she would ever have with this man, who, despite having tried to convince herself otherwise, would always remain a very important part of her past.

Madhu didn't see or hear of Som any more, after that episode. Mysteriously, the meetings had ceased happening at their house. When she asked her father why the society hadn't been meeting as planned, he simply said they had moved their headquarters somewhere else, somewhere safer so that she wouldn't be in jeopardy. 'It was wrong of me to bring them into this house,' he'd said and Madhu didn't argue.

Som too tried his best to stay away from her. He had managed to convince Madhu's father to have the meetings at Mr Mukherjee's house and luckily the location suited the other members better so there was no resistance from anyone. Seeing Madhu again had given him a renewed sense of hope but now he realized he had just been naive. He couldn't fight destiny. Som became more and more withdrawn. He drew himself deeper into his books and became more dedicated to the work of the society. His days were filled from morning till evening but at night, when there were no plots to hatch, no conspiracies and secrets to divulge, when the rest of the members of the society had gone back to their own homes, Som would still lie awake in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what his Madhu was doing just then. He envisioned her, just the way he'd last seen her: walking away, her shapely silhouette swerving from side to side with her every step. Her hair was loose, just the way he loved it, and he yearned to touch her, to weave his fingers through the dark strands as the silky wispiness flowed between his fingers. He had to use every sinew in his body to control his urges. But there was a larger, more immediate, fight taking place, as the British made public their plans on dividing Bengal into East and West, thereby segregating the Hindus and Muslims. Protests were brewing, riots were breaking out, and Som knew he couldn't be distracted by love. There were far more urgent matters on hand: a fight for freedom.

CHAPTER SIX

THE EVENING OF MARCH 7, 1905 was not an ordinary one. By then, the days had gradually become warmer and consequently the people, more restless in the heat. But there was a different kind of unrest stirring in the city. The plans for the partition of Bengal had been in the making for a few years now but it was only the previous year that the government had made an official announcement. The division would segregate what was mostly Muslim territory from the Hindu. Although most Muslims were under the impression that having their own land would help them rise socially, giving them equality with their Hindu cousins, most of the Hindus of West Bengal were enraged by the idea of their land being divided.

It was on that evening in 1905, which also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Presidency College, that Lord Curzon was to give a speech at the anniversary ceremony. Although the speech in itself wouldn't be political in nature, the main agenda was to put a stop to all the rumours and instability that had begun to shake the city. That evening was set to be special in more ways than one and Chandan insisted that Madhu attend.

The anniversary was a week away and as the dreaded occasion approached, Madhu was nervous albeit quite curious about her first formal social occasion in Calcutta. She fretted over what to wear, eventually settling on a rich blue silk sari, draped in the traditional Bengali style over the front, pinned on the shoulder by a gold brooch that belonged to her late mother and a pair of demure gold earrings she had found in her mother's jewellery collection. She couldn't help admire them as the heavy bell-shaped earrings tingled happily each time she moved her head. On her hands she wore a pair of thick gold bracelets and left her neck bare. She dressed with utmost care—unsophisticated villagers often betrayed themselves not just by underdressing, but by overdressing as well. For upper-class Bengalis, there was a certain tactlessness and vulgarity in over-opulence and excessive showiness and Madhu had to make sure she got it just right. If only her mother were there to help, she thought wistfully.

Her palms were sweaty as she rode in the carriage with her father through the city night, when all the chaos of the streets was hidden under a dark veil, just the sound of the horse's hooves on the cobbled streets, the jingling of its harness, the rattling of the carriage as they made their way towards Bowbazar area, the university district of Calcutta.

During the ride, Madhu was full of questions about Mr Roy and Chandan explained to his daughter that Prafulla Roy, although Bengali by blood, was not a native Calcuttan. Born near Dhaka, to a Hindu family,

he grew up in Bombay before leaving for England to study law. There, he met and fell in love with an English woman whom he married, much against the will of both families, and brought back to Calcutta. Although this was cause for much scandal and gossip at first, gradually he was accepted into both the English as well as Bengali circles. Within a short span of time, he had risen to the position of judge at the Calcutta High Court, the oldest high court in India. It was only recently that Presidency College had been brought under the umbrella of Calcutta University, thanks to the diligent and endless lobbying by Mr Roy, without whom, perhaps, the college would still have had just a hundred students and only two departments—humanities and science.

Mr Roy had first met Chandan almost thirty years ago, when both were living in Calcutta. He had just completed his studies in England and returned to his homeland with his new English wife and Chandan, who was some years younger, was just about to complete his studies in the city. Although Chandan had later chosen to return to a simple, almost monastic life in Radhanagar, he had been very much a part of the literary milieu of Calcutta in his youth. He, along with Prafulla Roy and some others, had started one of the premier literary magazines of the city. What had initially started out as just a publication where they could voice their opinions and print their own writing without any censorship, soon turned into a highly popular, widely circulated journal. Chandan still recalled how, after class, they would all congregate

at Mr Roy's house, discussing the arts and politics, deliberating and arguing through the night. By the time they married, life had drawn them into diverse duties and professions. Their scholarly dreams were eventually put to rest as careers overshadowed their lofty, youthful ambitions.

'Did you know, Madhu,' said Chandan, 'that Mr Roy's grandfather was the great Raja Ram Mohan Roy?' Everyone knew Raja Ram Mohan Roy—father of modern-day Bengal, who amongst many other things fought vehemently for women's rights, for their education and the abolishment of sati. But to Chandan, he was not only all that, he was also the most famous person to be born in Radhanagar, although he left the village when he was just a little boy. On a larger scale, this man had stirred the heart of India, but within the microcosm of a small village, he had taught its inhabitants how to think, how to live, how to be. And it was partly because she was so inspired by him, by the pride and joy of Radhanagar, that Madhu had the courage to be so defiant, to pursue her own education, to be radical in many ways that women of her generation would never dare. And now, leaving Radhanagar, following that main gravel road all the way to Calcutta, which had once been his journey as well, she felt even closer to him and his cause.

In the pitch-dark night, the white façade of Presidency College appeared fluorescent under the pale moonlight. It stood majestically at the corner of the main crossing, the trees arching into the entrance. A

long red carpet was spread from the gates and up the stairs, leading into the main building as Chandan and Madhu followed the crowd through the long pillared hallways into the large hall where the Viceroy was to give his speech.

There were hundreds of people—standing body to body, tiptoeing over each other in vain attempts to get a glimpse of the Viceroy. The front of the hall was lined with chairs occupied by the eminent guests. The men wore dark grey suits or the traditional dhoti—depending on where they came from; their hair slicked back, they stood around in clusters exchanging polite smiles as the women stood dutifully beside them. They wore silk and lace and reeked of perfume. They eyed Madhu surreptitiously as she walked towards the front of the hall with her father, passing them by, all the way to the other end of the room where Mr Roy stood, dressed in fine rich silk dhoti and kurta and a jamewar shawl slung over his shoulder. He was a short, balding, round man, never without his spectacles, now in his sixties, age having eroded the sharpness of his features. Those thin, round, wire frames sitting on the bridge of his nose, which ever so often he would push up with the nook of his index finger, had become a trade mark of sorts.

He was surrounded by a group of people. 'Professor! You've finally arrived,' he called out to Chandan, as they approached.

'Mr Roy, this is truly a magnificent event that you have organized,' said Chandan as he bowed slightly and folded his hands before the other guests.

'Thank you, sir,' he beamed. Then, looking at Madhu, he added, 'I see you've brought along your daughter. You better be careful, Chandan, for she will soon be the envy of all Calcutta girls,' Mr Roy laughed, making Madhu blush.

One by one, Mr Roy introduced them to all the distinguished members of the Presidency College faculty. There was Dr Bose, the young scientist, who had just started the new science department, Professor Nandi who taught European history, and Anjan Sengupta, the mathematician. While Chandan naturally merged into the cluster of intellectuals, Madhu felt awkward—a small fly on the wall, fluttering about. Just then, Madhu heard a familiar woman's voice behind her. 'Don't pay any attention to those men, they think they know everything!' said the loud voice and spinning around, she was ecstatic to see the face of an old acquaintance—Bini. Madhu couldn't have been more relieved to see Som's cousin, whom she hadn't seen since Durga Puja the previous year when she had been invited to their grand ceremony. Bini beamed at Madhu, looking at her kindly as if she too had been in that very same position at one time. She looked so dignified, thought Madhu, in a simple yet elegant egg-shell white sari with a thin maroon border, the end draped over her head. Unable to contain her happiness, she affectionately hugged the other woman. 'When did you come here, Bini? Father didn't mention anything to me.'

'I arrived just a few days ago with my uncle,' she proclaimed. 'Som had mentioned that you were

in town and I had a suspicious feeling that I'd be seeing you here today which is why I hadn't sent a message earlier,' she said, with a sparkle in her eyes which made Madhu shift uneasily. 'So how do you like Calcutta, my dear?' she asked, pulling back from the embrace and now holding Madhu at arm's length and taking a good look at her.

'It's everything it promised to be, and more,' gushed Madhu. 'Will you be staying here long?' she asked Bini eagerly.

'As long as Uncle decides to stay,' she smiled sadly. Then looking around the hall, she said, 'I can tell you haven't been in such a situation before, but don't worry, before long this too will lose its edge.' She sighed as if the evening was nothing more than another one of the dozens of gatherings that she must be obliged to attend. Her eyes glazed over the entire room and all the people in it, looking half bored.

As the men kept up their discussions and the women continued to hover around, shifting their weight from one leg to the other, looking around this way and that, sipping glasses of water, stifling yawns, Madhu noticed a striking woman talking to Mr Roy. There was an allure in her that she couldn't quite grasp. She weaved through the room with a grace that Madhu knew one could only be born into, not taught. Later, when she was reunited with her father at last, having finally spotted him in the centre of the room, surrounded by a group of scholars, she pointed at the woman and asked him who she was.

'Ooh, I see you have an eye for the right people!'

he mused. 'Sarala Debi is a very important person, my dear. Her father was a Secretary of State and her mother, Swarnakumari Debi, is an eminent writer, daughter of none other than Debendranath Tagore, of the noteworthy Tagore family. She was one of the first female graduates from Calcutta University, don't you remember? I must have told you that. She has done much for women's education and their advocacy. Of course, it helps to have the backing of the Tagore family, and her husband too, is a very successful journalist although he isn't here today. They live mostly outside Bengal these days but she is still often seen in the city,' said Chandan. Then, lowering his voice and edging closer to Madhu's ears, he whispered, 'She is interested in the work our society is doing. She said so personally, to Som. I've heard rumours to believe that she may be convinced to help and we could surely use a woman or two amongst us. So maybe you can make a positive impression on her!'

When Chandan was pulled away somewhere else by Mr Roy and Bini too had disappeared, Madhu once again found herself standing quite alone, not sure which way to look—not wanting to appear lost, not wishing to look unapproachable either. It had been over an hour since they had arrived and still, there was no sight of Som. She had been dying to ask Bini why he wasn't with her but couldn't get herself to bring him up in conversation. Something told her Bini knew more than she was letting on but Madhu had no desire to confront the situation when it was as good as over with. And still, as much as

she tried to convince herself that nothing should and could ever happen between them, if she was truly honest with herself, she'd have to admit that much of her arduous attempts at dressing up were really only for his benefit. She had expected him to already be there when they arrived, since they were slightly late themselves but now, an hour later, she was bitterly disappointed as she realized that perhaps he wasn't coming after all.

'A young, pretty lady shouldn't have to entertain herself,' said an unknown voice from behind. She spun around to find herself face to face with an Englishman. Madhu blushed and was immediately tongue-tied for she had never spoken to a foreigner before. What difference did it make that he had a dashing head of wispy blonde hair that carelessly flipped to one side and a pair of soft blue eyes that laughed as they looked at her; what difference did it make that he had a crisp English accent—just the way she had imagined a Shakespearean play to be acted out aloud; what did it matter that he looked so dashing in his grey suit, the jacket left unbuttoned, his one hand casually in the left pocket! He was a tall man, taller than most men she knew, including Som, and as he stood so embarrassingly close to her, what did it matter that she felt her heart pound so loudly that even the next person, standing twenty feet to her left, could probably hear! No, none of it should matter at all, she thought irritably, but it did for she felt uncomfortable—flattered but oddly uncomfortable.

She smiled politely and thought desperately to make an excuse to try and slip away but her mind was blank. 'I'm Harry,' he said, stretching out his hand. Madhu was mortified for it wasn't in her custom to accept the hand of any man in public, much less one she had never met. She didn't know where to look and hoped her father hadn't seen. 'I'm Madhu,' she said softly, unable to meet his hand in mid-air, clutching her hands together even tighter.

'Madhu! Meaning honey! How perfect,' he said. 'I'm charmed.' And Madhu blushed to the shade of the rose that stuck out of the gentleman's breast pocket.

'Are you a friend of Mr Roy's?' Madhu asked, studying the man's face curiously. How different he looked from the other men she had met. How different from Som. She wondered if the uneasiness she felt had something to do with the colour of his skin, or was it just the way he was looking at her. Not since Som had anyone looked at her so keenly, with so much interest, asked her so many questions, and been genuinely interested in what she had to say.

'Yes, yes, I am. I work at the Viceroy's office and have known Mr Roy for many years. And you? Are you enjoying Calcutta? Do you like the college where your father is teaching. Professor Lal, am I right?'

Madhu was surprised that he seemed to know so much about her. 'Yes, of course. Calcutta is a wonderful city. I'm enjoying every bit of it.'

'I'm sure it must get boring to be at home all day by yourself, though. You couldn't know too many people here.'

'I manage to keep myself occupied,' Madhu said, hoping it wasn't an effort at gaining an invitation.

'But your father must be a popular man. I'm sure he would waste no time in mingling with the society of Calcutta, much in the same way as he is now,' Harry laughed, looking over at Chandan. 'But, if you ever find yourself in want of a companion, I'm at your service,' he said, giving her a slight salute.

Just then, Bini approached them both and Harry bowed slightly at both women and walked away. Madhu was saved.

'What did he want?' said Bini, eyeing him as he walked away.

'Nothing, he just came over to introduce himself,' said Madhu, as casually as she could.

Bini looked at her sternly, as if to say that they both knew very well that nothing about a gentleman coming over to speak to a lady was just casual. But all she said was, 'In this city, it's best not to trust anything or anyone, no matter how tempting it may be.'

'He seemed quite nice,' said Madhu, but stopped halfway through her sentence, for just then, from the corner of her eye, she saw Som walk in and suddenly everything else blurred around her and she forgot what she was even talking about. Som hadn't arrived alone. Following him a few steps behind was the zamindar Narendranath Barman and strutting into the room beside him, like a peacock on display, was his daughter, Shyamali, sparkling from head to toe in jewels. She lifted her chin pointedly as she turned her head from one side to another, perusing the room.

Since Madhu was standing almost a little behind them, none of them had spotted her immediately.

With half her attention, she pretended to listen to Bini but her brain was following Som's every move. Narendranath Barman and Shyamali trailed behind him. Once in a while they would stop and greet guests they knew, before following suit once more. *How pathetic*, Madhu thought, disgusted. So she had been right. Despite everything that Som had said to her, having poured his heart out to her that day, he too had given in to his predetermined future and he seemed only too happy for it. He didn't even have the courage to be upfront and admit it to her; at the end of the day, he was just like any other man after all—a mere coward. She had put him up on a pedestal but now that image of him came crashing down. For all the talk of change and rebellion, he was nothing but a spineless wimp.

Her attention only snapped back to Bini when she realized the other woman was now speaking of none other than her Som. 'I've heard reports that my dear cousin Som is turning out to be one of the brightest and most promising individuals in the college,' she said. 'Mr Roy thinks there's much to expect from him.'

'Oh?' said Madhu. 'Expect in what sense?'

'Well, Mr Roy was just telling me that academically, he's brilliant and can go far, if he so chooses—grants, scholarships, research, pretty much anything in academia. But he's taken a particular interest in politics and he seems to have a way of convincing people, a way of speaking that people listen to. I

think he's someone we will be hearing and reading of more frequently.'

'What's he done that sets him apart?' enquired Madhu, almost half afraid. On the one hand she couldn't help but be proud of him, but politics and political activism wasn't what she had hoped Som would be involved with. Sure, there was glory in fighting and defending one's motherland and one's beliefs but there was also stupidity in that kind of bravado, which she thought was so unnecessary. There would always be a cause and a reaction, agenda and retaliation, but as long as it didn't involve anyone she knew personally, she was fine with it. Why couldn't Som just be content being a zamindar? Why this brash need to hold up one's hand in a fist, raise it above the head, and call for more than wanted attention?

'I suppose it's not what he has done so far, but what he is capable of doing,' said Bini.

Ever since Madhu had left him and ever since he'd moved to Calcutta, there was a restless spirit that had awakened in Som and was now pulling him in an unknown direction, almost involuntarily. He had never been the angry, protesting, volatile kind of man. A few years ago, if someone had told him that nationalism and the national struggle would be his chosen path, he'd have laughed in their face. But it seemed only natural now. There was an inexplicable frustration, pent-up energy, and dissatisfaction within him that needed to be let out and this was the only way he had found release. The passion he felt in protesting and spreading anti-government sentiments

among the people, gave him a sense of purpose—a goal; something to look forward to in the emptiness and futility that had pervaded his personal life ever since he had begun to accept that he could never be with Madhu.

Did he really believe in the cause? He certainly did—he believed in a unified Bengal, he believed in the old glory of its history and power which would be vanquished with the partition. He believed in preservation and he believed people like him, who had influence, means, and support, should stand up and say something. The British motive for dividing Bengal into East and West could benefit no one other than themselves and in the division they would be dislodging the influence and supremacy of a large and powerful state which they obviously couldn't control.

'Som! You're late!' cried a voice and he looked up to see Chandan-babu, smiling, feeling reassured by the sight of his childhood teacher, who had now grown to become a true pillar in his life. Had it not been for his encouragement and support, Som didn't think he would've found the strength to speak out aloud, to truly believe in this cause. But it was more than that, for these days, since they had arrived in Calcutta, seeing Chandan-babu always meant Madhu was somewhere nearby. And the sight of her, regardless of how torturous, was like the smell of lavender—her aura was filled with a sense of calm and tranquillity, and he relished every rare moment of it.

Even now, as he stood face to face with his old schoolmaster, all he could really think of was where

his daughter would be. She couldn't be far. He looked around and finally spotted her, standing next to Bini at the far end of the hall, looking exquisite. How the sari clung to her body, each fold so perfectly aligned with her contour. How her back curved into its thin mould, and from beneath, the glimpse of her bronze skin, glistening in radiance. How softly her dark hair moulded her face, how shy she looked standing huddled amidst the other guests yet smiling so dazzlingly. He longed to go over, to put an arm around her and guard her from all the other men's attention that she was receiving. Already he could see a certain young officer making his way towards her, beseeching her attention—the one that had once belonged solely to him. But he had to constantly remind himself that she was just a distraction, a test. She was free to choose whoever she wanted, but of course she was already someone else's.

'Som!' said Shyamali from behind him. 'You're ignoring me,' she complained. 'Is there something that has caught your attention?'

'If something has, it is certainly not undeserving,' snapped Som.

Just then a hush swept through the hall as Lord Curzon took the stage. Conversations paused, faces turned forward, and all attention was now on the Viceroy as he began his speech. Lord Curzon spoke at great length of the history of the college—from its humble roots in a house rented from Gorachand Bysack in Garanhatta to the day when the first meeting of the Brahmo Samaj was held at the institute. It was

only in 1855, exactly fifty years ago, that the modern-day Presidency College was formed but it soon became a pioneer in education across the country.

As the speech continued and most of the guests were preoccupied, Som took the opportunity to slip out into the veranda for some fresh air. The cool winter air pierced his lungs as he inhaled sharply, and as he exhaled, he tried to erase the intoxicating vision of Madhu from his mind.

'Shouldn't you be inside? You're ignoring your companion,' said a voice, and he didn't have to turn around to know who it was. It was the voice that buzzed in his mind throughout the din of the day; the same silvery voice that gurgled like a mountain stream through the stillness of his dreams, a voice that repeated like a haunting melody in his mind over and over and over again. His most beloved voice of all—Madhu's.

'If you're referring to Shyamali, she's not my companion,' he said bitterly. 'Although I can hardly say the same for you. What will your new English lover think if he sees you outside alone with me?' he said. 'I can't possibly match up to his ranks.'

Madhu felt her cheeks turn hot in anger. 'If I didn't know you better, I'd say you actually sound jealous,' Madhu said.

'You don't, you don't know me at all. You never have,' he replied coldly, anger being the only way he could mask what he was really thinking.

'I've been hearing things about you,' she said after a brief pause.

'Oh?'

'That you're our budding freedom fighter and have the power to unite the people,' she continued.

Som laughed insincerely. 'Oh that, that's just talk. They just need a strong mule that can carry their plans forward and I let them use me.'

'What are you really doing here, Som?' asked Madhu. 'Here in Calcutta that is. Are you running away or running towards something?'

'Maybe both. But aren't we all guilty of that? To go somewhere always means that we're leaving something else, isn't it? I'm not running like a coward, Madhu, I'm leaving behind, I'm discarding. All my life I've been complacent, but now, I need something more. I won't be easily satisfied.'

'What is it you're looking for?' Madhu almost whispered.

'I'll tell you when I find it,' he said.

'Look, whatever you do, it's your own business, but I do want you to be careful. I may not be aware of everything but I do know of the riots that are sprouting all around us and I don't want to see you get hurt,' said Madhu, her tone worried.

'Don't worry, I can take care of myself,' said Som bitterly, then brushed past her as he walked into the hall. If he stood around her for another moment, he thought, he wouldn't be responsible for his actions.

The Viceroy continued speaking and throughout his speech, there were many accolades as well as many cries of disapproval as he went on to explain the need to divide and consolidate the state for administrative

purposes. But everything was only mindless banter in Som's mind as the remainder of the night became bitterly painful for him—painful to even be there, in Madhu's presence, knowing that she was watching; knowing that if he turned his face even slightly to his right, their eyes would meet. But he couldn't soften, not now, not when there was work to do. He was on a roll—charging ahead with a mission. He had no time to stop and look at anything, much less the face of a beautiful woman that he could just look at, never touch. Everything about her was like a narcotic—intoxicating, addictive, but it could never bring any result. She would always just remain a distraction; her love, like venom, would poison his mind. He had to do whatever was in his power to stay away from her completely.

Madhu did not hear of or see Som after the day of the anniversary ceremony. Sometimes, she would intentionally walk to the college, taking Hari along with her, making an excuse to meet her father after his classes were finished, in the hope of bumping into him. Each time she saw a white-clothed figure, her heart would jump, thinking it was him, but invariably the person would turn around and her spirits would be crushed. And so, in that manner, weeks went by without her catching a glimpse of the very person that she had rejected, but couldn't seem to forget. She had kept him at bay, not daring to let him get too close, but she needed just the sight of him, for, if nothing else, he was a validation of her womanhood; a reminder of how she felt. To see him

was to experience the spirit of love, if not possess the actual object itself.

Bini sent a message through a servant that she would like Madhu's company to visit a local sweet shop. The servant waited by the gates as Madhu read the letter. 'Tell him not to leave, I'm coming,' she ordered Hari, knowing her father wouldn't object to such an invitation. It was rare that she had an opportunity to leave the house since it was inappropriate to be loitering about the streets alone and she jumped at the opportunity. Quickly getting dressed, she got into the zamindar's carriage which was waiting for her and gave orders to Hari for the rest of the day, saying that she would return before her father came home. 'I'm going to take you somewhere very special,' said Bini when Madhu finally joined her. 'It's a new sweet shop that has opened doors just near the university area. It's called Nabin Chandra Das and they're famous for a new invention known as rasagollas. I promise you, Madhu, it is so tender and sweet, it will literally dissolve in your mouth. Uncle is having some important guests tonight and I wanted to impress them.'

The two girls giggled and talked as the carriage drove them through the city. As they rode past the college gates, Madhu stared out of the window, silently sorting through the people, to see if she could spot her Som. Bini, noticing, said, 'Madhu, you seem different these days from when we first met.'

'How so?' asked Madhu, defensively.

'You seem so distant, your mind—so far away.

You've lost the exuberance that was so special about you, as if you bear the pain of having lost someone dear to you.'

Madhu was alarmed that her face could be so transparent. She blushed, looking away. As if reading her mind, Bini laughed. 'I know because I've had it too,' she said.

Madhu spun around to face her. 'You have? Who?'

'It doesn't matter who. He's gone and my heart will never belong to anyone else. That is why I have chosen never to marry. Spiritually, I've been a widow for many years now. I will always be in mourning. But be careful, you are still young. This isn't a world where you can charge in with a heart full of passion. Passion is addictive, so satisfying, but it has its consequences too. It is usually always accompanied by choices.' Looking at Madhu more carefully she added, 'But I suspect you already know that. You seem like a headstrong but sensible sort of person. That's why I admire you so much. You've already made your choices, haven't you?'

Madhu was quiet for a long time before she replied, 'It's not easy to have to make decisions.'

'No, my dear, it isn't. But you know what you needed to do,' sympathized Bini.

'Yes, I suppose,' said Madhu sadly. 'Still, it doesn't make it any easier.'

'Well, is it a choice you believe in? Something you can live with, without feeling any regret?' she asked.

'No, no, I cannot regret,' said Madhu, shaking her head. 'For it is the right choice. Perhaps I can regret being the way I am—righteous, practical—but my morality makes sense to me. It is mine after all. I don't feel the need to justify it to anyone. So no matter what choices we make, if we follow our own conscience, it can never really be wrong, can it?'

'You are lucky to have the kind of father you do, Madhu, who lets you make your own choices. Take advantage of it. For you are one of the few women who won't have to fall into the trap of a pre-made life. You can make your own. Take my brother for instance. My uncle is not an easy person to disobey. And this whole nationalism nonsense is really a battle between the two of them. But Madhu, it won't be easy and along the way there'll always be those who'll condemn you for it. But let them. Let them talk. Do not listen. Just listen to the voice inside you, your instinct. It will tell you what to do.'

'Do you think Som will go back to Panchkula some day?' asked Madhu.

Bini smiled. 'He will go where his heart is. He always has.' She looked at Madhu straight in the eye and gave a little nod, then turned her head to look out of the window.

They now rode past the race tracks near the Maidan. The sprawling green lawns were empty now, eagerly awaiting the weekend when the polo games were scheduled. Early on Sunday mornings the races would be held. Bini suddenly sat up, looking brightly at Madhu. 'Would you like to go to the races?' she asked.

Madhu's eyes widened, sparkling like a child's who had done something she was forbidden. 'I'm sure Uncle wouldn't mind if you came as our guest. Please say you will,' Bini coaxed. But before Madhu could even answer, she said, 'That's settled then. Next week is the Viceroy Cup and you will attend it with us. I will send you an official invitation and I'm sure your father wouldn't object if you went as a guest of my uncle and me.'

Chandan, predictably, didn't protest when he received an invitation for his daughter to attend the horse races at the Royal Calcutta Turf Club. 'You do know it's a very special invitation,' he warned Madhu. 'People from our background rarely get invited to such things, you know. You're lucky you have friends in high places. These races are mostly reserved for the British and the high society, not a schoolmaster's daughter, so maybe you shouldn't tell them who you are.'

'I'm proud of who I am, Father,' she said, kissing him on the cheek.

The next Sunday, on the day of the races, the zamindar, Gopaldas himself, along with Bini arrived at the gates of No. 10, Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road, to pick Madhu up. Her face brightened as she saw them arrive through the window—she had been waiting, dressed and ready, for quite a while. 'How do I look?' she whispered to Bini as she seated herself next to her friend in the carriage. 'Gorgeous,' the other woman whispered back. 'I love what you have done to your hair,' she said, admiring the twisted

bun that had taken Madhu half the morning and she patted it in satisfaction.

The Royal Calcutta Turf Club held a privileged status throughout India, and was earlier reserved exclusively for the British; Gopaldas was the first Indian to be awarded membership to the club. His influence was evident from the minute they disembarked from the carriage; they were ushered directly into the clubhouse by the guards waiting outside. Only when the races started would they take their reserved seats in the new stands that had been built on the main grounds.

Madhu felt completely out of place and uneasy as they gathered in the main clubhouse, where most of the guests were foreigners, speaking in English, wearing suits or jodhpurs and helmets. 'Just relax and enjoy yourself,' said Bini as she walked over to a table, to help herself to some sweets that had been laid out. As Madhu looked around anxiously, a handsome officer, dressed in khaki jodhpurs, carrying his helmet under his left arm, approached her, saluting slightly. 'We meet again,' he said, holding out his hand. It was the same gentleman she had met at the Viceroy's speech at Presidency College—Harry. 'This is certainly an unexpected surprise. I didn't think to see you again so soon. It must be my lucky day!' he said and Madhu smiled shyly, unable to say much. This time, however, she raised her hand to take his.

'So you like races?' Harry asked.

'It's my first time,' she managed to mumble.

'Well, I hope your being here brings me good luck,' he said.

'Oh? You will be racing?' Madhu asked.

'Oh yes, my horse, Queenie is one of the top contenders this year. In fact, she is the first horse to ever be favoured two years in a row. She's a breathtaking Arab colt, the fourth that I've acquired. Would you like to take a look at her?' he asked keenly.

Madhu looked towards Bini questioningly and the other woman, pressed a smile, silently nodded, giving her approval. As they walked through the grounds, towards the back where the stables were, Madhu couldn't help but be flattered by the attention which she received from him.

They walked side by side, past the other jockeys, the horses, the white fences that separated the tracks, the smell of the stables all around them, as Madhu let go of her shyness and now conversed easily with Harry. She learned that he had been posted in Calcutta for five years now and hoped to return to England the following year. That the rest of his family was still in London and he visited annually. Most importantly, she learned that he was unmarried and quite unattached. As they spoke, she looked up at him, squinting against the sun which made his blonde hair look like strands of gold, wondering what it would be like if Harry visited her in Radhanagar—in a quiet, insipid little village. But for now, she would stop thinking about differences in class and enjoy the afternoon for what it was, she thought happily, as Harry led her into the stables where his horse was being saddled.

Madhu stroked the colt timidly and Harry laughed at her. 'You can get closer, she won't do anything,' he said, pushing her gently forward and as he did so, she was vividly aware of his hand brushing against her back and the warmth of his skin against hers. Harry looked at her and said, 'I dedicate my race today to you. If I win, know that I've won only because you were in the stands, watching me.'

'If you win,' laughed Madhu, 'it's because you're a very good horseman, I'm sure it has nothing to do with my being here today.'

'Oh but it does, it has everything to do with you being here today,' he said, looking intently into her eyes.

'What do you get if you win?' she asked, looking away and intentionally changing the topic.

'Your admiration, I hope,' he said, but when Madhu, now happily playing the same game as him, looked at him coyly, rolling her eyes in mockery, he laughed and said, 'The prize this year is seven thousand rupees, an increase of two thousand from last year.'

The two of them lingered by the stables a little longer, Madhu thoroughly basking in his attention, till it was time for the races to begin. 'I'll take you back to the clubhouse,' he said, courteously leading her by the elbow. No sooner did they turn around to go back than they came face to face with Som. Suddenly all her senses seemed to return as she hastily shook off Harry's arm. He shook hands with Harry, politely wishing him good luck as he looked at Madhu. 'The

races are about to begin and they were looking for you at the clubhouse,' he said.

'You didn't have to come and get me, I'm capable of getting back there by myself,' she said, looking right at him, then brushing past and walking away.

When she got back to the clubhouse, with Som following close behind her, Gopaldas said, 'Oh there you are. I thought Captain Albright had kidnapped you and we sent Som to look for you.'

'I'm quite all right,' said Madhu, flushed, fully aware that Som was now standing right behind her, so close that she could almost feel his breath on the back of her neck. She wished he wouldn't hover around her as every moment that she was near him, made her completely self-conscious. Had he seen her flirting with the Englishman? What would he think of her? Madhu worried, but by then Som had already left her side and was busy talking to someone else. At first she couldn't tell who it was for he was blocking her view but as he shifted slightly to the right, Madhu's heart sank: it was Shyamali. She now approached Madhu with a smile which she couldn't help interpret as one mixed with repugnance. 'So, you are here as well? I didn't expect to see you today,' she said, almost with a snort.

'I am here to watch the horse race...' offered Madhu, slightly defensive, but she was interrupted by the other girl's sudden outburst.

'I know what match you are really interested in. Do you take me for a fool? I know your type very well. If you had any self-respect, you'd see that you

are wasting your time. You've already lost. There are some things you can never have.'

Madhu couldn't hold back any longer. 'I think you're wrong. We're obviously not playing the same game. Besides, if you were so confident of your win, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we?'

Just then, Madhu saw Som approaching them.

Looking up at Som with big, widened eyes, Shyamali said, 'You'll take me to the stands won't you, please?'

'Of course,' said Som, just as he was expected to and Madhu wondered if it was just her imagination or did his voice lack enthusiasm and eagerness, as if he was just chivalrously performing a duty.

But once the races had begun, Madhu decided she would not let Shyamali's silly accusations ruin her day. She tried her best to ignore both Shyamali and the man who was so consistently a distraction that by now it was almost tedious. As all the ten horses with their riders lined up at the starting line and Bini leaned in close to explain the rules, Madhu strained her eyes to catch sight of Harry, finally spotting him, third from the left. He looked up at the stands, directly towards them and bowed his head in a subtle salute. The trumpets sounded and when the flags were lowered, the race began. The horses galloped across the lawns as their hooves dug frantically into the ground, dust flashing past. Madhu found herself at the very edge of her seat as the riders rounded the first bend—nonetheless, she all but lost sight of her Englishman. She grabbed the binoculars which

Bini had lying on her lap, trying to look for him at the far end of the course. When they came around again, she was elated to see that he was ahead of the pack. The riders went around three more times and by the fourth and last lap, Harry, riding on Queenie, crossed the finish line several feet before the others. He had won and now everyone in the stands was up, clapping, cheering and hooting. Harry got off his colt, taking his helmet off and shaking out his hair which fell clumsily over his face. Once again he looked up at the stands at what seemed to Madhu to be right at her, and bowed. After the awards were given and speeches were made, when they were getting up to leave, Harry came over to where they were seated. 'Miss Lal, I wanted to say goodbye before you left.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Madhu, quite flabbergasted.

'Would you mind if I escorted you back to your carriage?' he said, looking down at her.

'No, of course not,' she stammered, feeling mortified at all the unabashed attention that she was receiving. She swung around to see where Som was amidst all the people to notice that his chair was empty. He'd already left.

'Are you looking for someone?' Harry asked as she nervously perused the crowd.

Madhu shook her head and silently scolded herself for being so silly. How could she still be concerned about Som when there was this dashing young officer, so blatantly showering all his interest on her! 'No,' she said firmly. 'No one.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT HAD BARELY BEEN a few days since the races when one afternoon, while Madhu was alone in the house, resting on her bed on a lazy afternoon, Hari came knocking, announcing a visitor. Madhu pulled herself together and entered the living room. But her spirits fell as a tan-kurta-clad figure spun around on her entrance. No, it wasn't Som, but the man's figure was strangely familiar. With a jolt she recognized him. Bidyut. But why was he in Calcutta? 'What are you doing here?' she asked stiffly.

'I've come to find you, of course,' he replied.

'Find me? Why?'

'Madhu, you can't run away from me—I'm your chosen husband and whether you like it or not, you belong to me.'

'How dare you? I don't belong to you or to anyone else! The promise our fathers had made was a juvenile bond between two friends. My future is not his to give away. It is mine,' she retorted.

'You're a foolish, headstrong girl. You don't know what you are throwing away by refusing me. You think you can do better than me? You should consider yourself blessed for even having such a fortunate

pre-arranged alliance. Someone of your stature could hardly be deserving of more,' he snarled.

Madhu looked at him, disgusted at what she saw. 'I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on the planet,' she said, her face contorting in a hatred which she could no longer conceal.

'I don't believe that will be your final answer,' laughed Bidyut, now raising his voice, his body stiffened and his chest puffed up. 'You will regret this.'

'Never! Not in a million years. Not in this life or the next. You're wasting your time here. I won't change my mind,' said Madhu, bitterly, pressing her lips tightly together.

'Oh but you will change your mind. You'll see. You can take all the time you wish, my little princess, but like it or not, your future will only lead to one end—and that is in my arms. So run as far as you wish but I will always catch up with you,' he laughed as he came closer, touching her hair with his hand and tracing the lines of her face.

Madhu felt a venomous fire sizzle inside her as it rose through her core, burning through her lungs, her chest, her arms and before she could realize what she doing, her hand flung across his face, leaving a red remnant across his cheek. 'Get out of my house,' she said, her voice shaking, her palm stinging from the brutal contact with his abrasive skin.

'You witch,' he said, as he grabbed her wrist, holding it so tightly in his fist that Madhu thought her blood circulation would stop.

'Let go, you're hurting me,' she cried, now wincing

in pain and fear. Should she scream? Call out to Hari?

'I'll be back,' he whispered, his snake-like eyes piercing her, as he finally released her hand and walked out.

Madhu just stood there trembling, unsure of what had just happened. What did he mean by threatening her like that? Did he have the power to take her by force? Did working for the zamindar give him so much authority and control? Did he think she was a marked territory for him to conquer and uproot, just like that? She sat down by the window, quivering in fear as tears rolled down her cheeks. She was ashamed. Ashamed at how she had just behaved and ashamed at the thought of how her father would confront his dear friend Dwijendra. In a way, she felt oddly responsible for what had just happened. Perhaps she had led him on. Perhaps it had been her fault that she wasn't more forthright that day when they'd first met. She had thought that buying more time would've been beneficial for everyone concerned; half hoping that with time, everyone would forget about this whole arrangement. But all she'd done was create more turmoil and conflict. She had made a colossal mess of it all. Som wouldn't even look at her, Bidyut was ready to accost her and soon, even her father would lose his patience. The entire world seemed to be darkening and closing in on her and she felt lost and despondent.

All this time, Madhu had been unsure of what to do about her intended marriage to Bidyut, wishing

that she would find answers while on this trip to Calcutta. But it was only now, as she imagined his eyes lit with contempt; his mouth curved cruelly when he had held her hand so tightly; his slimy fingers as they touched her—it was only now that she realized, with absolute certainty, as surely as she knew her own name, that she could never have any sort of a life with such a man. She could never, in a million years, learn to love someone as despicable as him.

Madhu didn't mention Bidyut's visit or the fact that she had even seen him to her father that evening. Instead, she remained in her room when he arrived, sending word through Hari that she wasn't feeling well and would stay in for the remainder of the night. The next morning, when she came out of her chambers, intentionally late, her father had already left for work.

She was afraid of being alone in the house, in fear that Bidyut may visit yet again, pacing in and out of her room all morning till she heard the sounds of the gates open. Rushing over to the window and looking out, she saw Bini climbing out of the carriage. Relieved, thankful, she ran over to the staircase as the other woman entered the house. 'Oh Bini, you have no idea how glad I am to see you,' she called out over the carved railing, then ran down the steps and hugged the other woman.

Bini, rather alarmed at Madhu's behaviour, looked at her questioningly, squinting her eyebrows. 'What's happened? Come, let's sit, and tell me everything.'

'Not here, come into my bedroom,' she said, and led her through the corridor to the privacy of her own room. There, as they sat cross-legged on the high four-poster bed, windows opened, door closed tight, there, holding Bini's hand in hers, palms sweating as if everything had happened only a few moments ago, in one breath, without any pause, she recounted the entire incident from the previous day. Bini's eyes widened with each sentence that poured out of Madhu's mouth. 'How can you not tell your father? Someone should be told!'

'For what? Think of all the hurt it will cause both our fathers,' moaned Madhu.

'But maybe something can be done,' Bini tried to reason.

'Done? What can be done, Bini? You know even better than I do that for people like him there is no justice.'

'I cannot believe that Uncle would keep such a loathsome man employed. Maybe I should say something to him, or perhaps to Som, maybe he can personally deal with Bidyut.'

Madhu jumped up, alarmed. 'No, Bini, you musn't tell him. Please! Promise me you won't. Not him, not your uncle, no one. They may not even believe me. Bidyut has too much clout with your father.'

'As you have with Som?'

Madhu blushed. 'Don't speak nonsense now,' she said.

'Enough with the pretences, Madhu. Be truthful. Is there something between my cousin and you? You

know I'd be the first to even encourage you if there ever was. Don't feel that you have to hide it from me.'

Madhu bit her lip. 'Fine, I'll tell you the truth. No, there's nothing between Som and me. Not now, at least. I don't even know what it was before. It was something, but then again, it was nothing, really.' She paused. 'Just a few shared moments, that's all it was.'

'But you have feelings for him?'

'I did. I'm not sure what I feel any longer,' admitted Madhu. 'I try not to think of it. Come on, we both know it won't do me any good.'

'I can't say it's not a tough one! On the one hand I'm thrilled. Just the thought of him ending up with that Shyamali makes me nauseated. But Madhu, I have to be honest. It's going to be hard to get past my uncle and aunt.'

Bini sighed, clasping Madhu's hands in hers. 'Very well, dear friend, I won't say a word to anyone, about any of this.' She looked comfortingly at Madhu, who was inexplicably grateful for her presence.

She then remembered a conversation that they had had in the carriage some weeks ago. It had been something she'd thought of often but hadn't had an opportunity to bring up since they'd never had any moment alone. 'Bini,' she said, looking earnestly at her, 'you once told me that you too, had experienced a loss; that you'd always live like a widow, never to marry. But you refused to tell me any more. Was it so painful?'

At first Bini didn't reply, just stared at the wooden shutters that striated the sunlight entering the room into thin bands. But then she spoke, hesitantly at first.

'It was a long time ago,' she said in a low voice. 'I was about your age. We were living in Calcutta most of that time, returning to Panchkula only every few months. I wasn't allowed to go out much—not in the way I am now, not even in the way you are. My uncle and aunt were much too conservative and preferred that I stay at home most of the time. So as you can imagine, I didn't have much awareness or knowledge of the outside world as you do.'

'Oh Bini...' Madhu started, but was cut off in mid sentence.

'The only contact I had with the outside world were the visitors that came to see my uncle,' she continued, 'and I would peer through the curtains to see them—what they were like, what they wore, how they behaved. I was so curious about everything but I was shut up in the house like a caged bird that was dying to stretch its wings out. And the longer I was locked in, the stronger was my desire to experience the outside world. On the evening of my eighteenth birthday, my uncle and aunt allowed me to attend a dinner party that they were hosting at the house. There were at least fifty guests—it was so grand!' Bini sighed. 'I was mesmerized by everyone, for I'd never had so much exposure to so many people before. Lords, ladies, officers, you name it,' she laughed. 'Which is why I sympathized when I saw you that day at the Presidency College anniversary

celebrations—so scared, shy, yet eager and willing to embrace something new. You see, even though all this is my world, something you think that I've been born into, my entitlement, so to speak, it's not something I was allowed to know. And oh, how I wanted to know, Madhu, I wanted to know everything that had been withheld from me! All the little secrets of the world!'

'What was it like?' asked Madhu curiously, 'attending your first coming-out event? Were you nervoūs?'

'Yes, a bit, but only at first. That night, I met someone at the house—an officer. He was a young man who had just arrived from London—very eager and ambitious. He was so dashing, so charming, and he spoke so eloquently, and I, having never met someone like him before, was instantly enamoured. I can still remember as he led me on to the veranda, as the rest of the party gathered in the dining room where dinner had been served. And we talked so long, under the shade of the evening sky—about him and me, about life—as the scent of the white jasmine floated in from the garden—it was the most romantic evening of my life. I suppose I wasn't the only one who was so bewitched, for the very next day, the young officer came back to see me and because my aunt was at home, he threw little pebbles on my window till I opened the shutters to see him standing below. We met like that, secretly for over a month, knowing that if we made our love public, it would never be accepted by my family. We weren't sure how to resolve things, only our appetite for love urging us on. We were so

young, so reckless; we had no plans and didn't need any. Then one day, when we were alone together, he told me that he was returning to England to see his mother who was very ill. He held my hands, promising me that he'd return. I begged him to take me with him, thinking that was my chance to escape. But he said he didn't want to do it that way—he didn't want to elope. He said he'd return and speak to my uncle, man-to-man. He left on a ship the very next day. How I wished I could have gone to the docks to see him off. As I sat on the bed, knowing that the ship was signalling its departure from the banks of the river, I was heartbroken. I didn't eat for days and became very ill. After he left, I waited—I waited every day and every night. I waited for a letter, for a sign, for his return. But nothing came, no word. A year went by and Uncle and Aunt kept insisting that it was time I thought about getting married. But all I could think of was my young officer and I would vehemently refuse.'

Bini stopped talking, looking down at the bed-sheets that she had wrung into a tight ball. 'Did you ever see him again?' Madhu asked, enthralled by the story. All this time, she had no idea that Bini was hiding such a dark secret within her soul. Her heart went out to the other woman and she realized that perhaps what linked them together most strongly was their shared intrinsic sense of personal loss.

'About a year after he had left, the annual Durga Puja took place in the mansions in Calcutta, instead of Panchkula. Many notable guests had been invited,

including the Governor-General himself. Amongst the guests was a lieutenant whom I got talking to. He told me that his brother had been stationed in Calcutta before him. That he had been here for not more than a few months when he had to suddenly leave for England as their mother took ill. Their mother got better but no sooner did she heal than he fell deathly ill and died. That brother was my young officer whom I had been waiting for. And as he told me the story, I couldn't even shed a tear. I stood motionless and he continued to speak. He told me his brother had been oddly mysterious about the few months that he'd been here in Calcutta, that ever since he had returned to England, he had become extremely concerned about his finances—taking great pains in accounting for his savings, speaking of buying a new home in the event that he got married in the near future, that he semed anxious and all he could speak of when he lay sick in bed was that he had to return to Calcutta. So you see, Madhu, I too have loved and lost, and I know I will never love anyone that way again. In a way, when his brother was speaking to me, I felt I had finally gained closure. All that year, I had been left hanging, like a pause, like a comma that connects two halves of a sentence, only that the second half of my life had yet to take place and I had spent most of it sitting by the window, just waiting. And even though I lost everything I had at that moment on learning of his death, what I gained was freedom for I was finally released. Sometimes, you know what you had and you know it can never be replicated. I'm

honoured that I knew a man such as him, thankful that he came into my life and touched it in a most delicate way, no matter how briefly. I can never be sorry for that.'

'Oh Bini,' said Madhu, hopelessly, finding herself at a complete loss for words.

'It's all right,' said the other woman, smiling sadly. 'It all feels like such a long, long time ago now, as if it was in another life.'

'I know what you mean,' said Madhu, solemnly.

When Bini left, Madhu sat wondering what was worse—to lose someone the way Bini had, involuntarily in death, or intentionally in choosing to give someone up, the way she did? Yes, there was an immense tragedy in the officer's death for it came without any warning; it came to someone so hopeful, so optimistic, someone who wasn't ready to quite relinquish the idea of love. She had been cheated, not only was the young officer's life cut short but also hers. Madhu had made her own decision and in that sense, could never feel that life had robbed her of something the way Bini did. Maybe that is why Bini had told her how lucky she was that she had made her own choices; that her life was not a slave to fate.

Yet, there was also a greater affliction in voluntarily and wilfully giving up something—knowing that if she had chosen, Som could have been hers but also having the foresight to realize that it could never have been a sustainable life. In many ways there was pain in having to make decisions and sometimes it was far

easier to have life make choices for you, by default. They were both victims: Bini of circumstances, Madhu of duty and obligations.

That night, she could not sleep well. She tossed about all night in bed and when dawn finally broke, she was relieved she didn't have to lie still any longer. After listening to Bini's story, she felt suddenly thankful—for life, for hope, for a future—all of which Bini seemed to have been left without. She told Hari that she would make her father's tea that morning and personally served it to him when he came out of his room for his morning cup. 'And to what do I owe this special occasion?' Chandan asked his daughter, eyeing her suspiciously.

'Nothing at all! Just for old times' sake,' she chirped, patting his hand.

Chandan grunted, for he had learned that nothing in life is free—not even a cup of tea made by the loving hands of one's very own daughter. But he had no time that morning to beat around the bush. 'I have to be at the college early today, there's an important meeting,' he explained and rushed off to get ready and leave. Madhu felt jittery in the house all by herself, once again traumatized by the thought of Bidyut. She was just wondering what to do, when Hari came in, saying there was a visitor. 'An English Babu,' he whispered, raising his eyebrows.

Madhu was astounded. Captain Albright, here, to see her? The very idea was preposterous, inconceivable. Surely he had to know how scandalous it would be if someone found out. But what could she do? Refuse

to meet him? Rudely snub him? Muttering to herself, partly curious, partly flattered, and partly shocked, she hurried into her bedroom to make sure she looked appropriate to welcome a guest.

Harry was sitting on the sofa in the drawing room, looking down at the carpet and he stood up gallantly as she entered the room. 'Madhu, I've come to see your father, but I've just been told that he's not here.'

'No, he's at the college, teaching. That's where he is every morning, Captain,' she said in a matter-of-fact manner.

'Ah...well...I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you...' he began.

'No, not at all, please have a seat,' Madhu offered, then asked Hari to fetch them tea.

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, till Harry stood up again, walking to the doorway and pacing back and forth. 'Madhu, I'm glad to see you again,' he said. 'I've been thinking about you.'

'I don't think this is appropriate,' she replied, not knowing what else to say. There was a part of her that longed to be reckless, having been so tightly reined in for so long, and yet, the other part was acutely aware of the situation—the differences between them as well as the fact that Hari could walk in any minute with the tea.

'I have to admit, Madhu, I didn't in fact come here to see your father but to see you. I know how it may look but I didn't know where or when I would see you again.'

Little butterflies were dancing inside Madhu now as she looked at her admirer unsurely. Harry had walked over to her now, holding both her hands in his and she shyly looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She wrung her hands free from his and pulled them away, his fingers tracking her arms lightly as she did so. This was the second man who had touched her that way but disappointedly, she noticed that his touch did not arouse the same reaction as Som's had. Som's fingers instantly evoked shock waves that sent goosebumps all over her body; even the thought of it now made her quiver in anticipation. Although it had been many weeks since he had forcibly kissed her in this very same house, she could still taste his lips on her lips; his moist kisses on her skin; his eyes on her eyes, his hands on her waist and she blushed in embarrassment. Harry's touch on the other hand was deficient, his fingers were cold—she almost wished that it could do the magic, which Som's did, if only it would mean that she was finally over him.

Luckily, just then, she heard Hari's footsteps approaching and she sprang apart from him, moving over to the far end of the sitting room. 'You keep a wonderful home here,' said Harry, giving up momentarily and finally taking the time to look around him.

'It's just staff housing, we haven't done anything special to it since we plan on moving out shortly,' said Madhu.

'Oh? enquired Harry. 'Already planning on moving?'

'This was only a temporary assignment for my father, we plan on going back to Radhanagar soon,' she said.

Harry looked concerned, frowning as he pondered for a moment. Then getting up, he said, 'I've taken up enough of your time, I'm sorry.'

'Not at all, Captain, I am pleased you came to visit,' said Madhu.

'I hope we will see each other again, very soon,' he said, bowing slightly, picking up his helmet. Madhu walked him to the door and watched him leave, confused at his abruptness and haste to leave when just a few minutes ago, he had seemed so enraptured in her presence. But not allowing herself to think much of it, she shrugged it off and went back into the house.

Harry's visit had quite the opposite effect on her than it should have. Instead of helping her forget about Som, it made her think of him even more. For a long time now, she had managed to suppress her feelings for him, but that day after Harry's visit, all her buried emotions seemed to resurface. Her heart thundered as if he were right there, behind her and all she had to do was turn around and face him. She could feel him breathing down her back, she could almost imagine him cupping her neck, tilting her head back and capturing her mouth. Annoyed with herself, she realized she had to leave, go out and get some fresh air. She rushed about as she got dressed, nervous at every sound she heard, thinking with each thud of a door or rattling of a shutter that Bidyut had returned.

'Hari, come with me, I want to go out,' she ordered the servant.

No sooner did she step out of the house than she bumped into Mr Majumdar, the gentleman who had first come to pick her and Chandan up at the station. 'My dear Madhu, I was just on my way in to drop off some papers for Chandan. But, where are you off to in such a hurry?'

'Oh! Nowhere in particular,' said Madhu, flustered, not having a prepared excuse on hand. 'Just going out for a walk, that's all,' she said breathlessly.

'Alone?'

'Well not quite alone, I take Hari with me. I've gotten quite accustomed to walking in Calcutta. There are so many people out on the streets that there's a sense of safety just in their sheer number.'

'Yes, but haven't you heard? There are riots near Shovabazar. I've heard reports that there's even been violence—lathi-charge. All the streets adjoining the area have now been barricaded and anyone who goes past the boundaries is being arrested. It started with just four young men but now it's escalated into a huge chaos involving hundreds who are screaming, "Vande Mataram". It isn't safe for you to be out by yourself today. Madhu, Chandan-babu has become a close friend of mine and you are almost like my own daughter. I would feel very responsible if I let you go off by yourself on such a day like today. I'd never be able to answer to him.'

'Thank you for being so thoughtful, Mr Majumdar, but I insist I'm fine. I hadn't been feeling well and

a breath of fresh air would do me good. Besides, I promise I won't go anywhere near that vicinity,' Madhu insisted.

Seeing how defiant she could be, and knowing he'd never be able to convince her otherwise, Mr Majumdar relented. 'I'll tell you what, I don't have any urgent business to attend to, would you mind terribly if I accompanied you?' he asked.

Madhu smiled warmly at the stout, bald gentleman, who was now taking out his handkerchief to wipe away the droplets of sweat which were beginning to form on his upper lip, as the afternoon sun got bolder. 'It would be a pleasure, Mr Majumdar,' she said, thankful in a way, for she had felt vulnerable and nervous since the incident the previous day and his company would give her a sense of added security.

'Come then, I will take you to the ghat by the Hooghly, far away from all the commotion. That is where all the Englishmen parade with their ladies.' Madhu laughed heartily at the elderly man, feeling completely at ease now that he was escorting her.

The sky was a spotless blue and the river beneath it sparkled like sapphire. As they walked by the river bank, the serene water on that windless, tranquil afternoon, there was hardly any reason to suspect that just a few miles north, there was violence and bloodshed. When Madhu thought about it, she felt anxious, knowing that any day now she would receive news that Som was involved in such an incident. She knew it was useless to worry but she had a dreadful intuition that before long a day would come that Mr Majumdar or perhaps

her father, would walk into the house, their head hung low, wiping tears with the end of their kurtas as they told her that Som had been arrested, or worse, had perhaps been injured or even killed.

But Mr Majumdar's spirits were high and he was completely unaware that she was so distracted and perturbed. 'You see those docks over there, my dear?' he said, pointing his mahogany walking cane in front of them. 'Those were the first docks built in the city by a Colonel Watson. They called it Watsgunge and this area over here, is called the Strand.'

Mr Majumdar and Madhu walked all along the length of the promenade, at a slow, careless pace, as if nothing else in the world mattered. As the afternoon sun began to lose its strength and a gentle evening breeze started blowing across the river, bringing with it the smell of the rajnigandha flowers, Madhu suddenly realized it was time to return home 'Mr Majumdar, Father will be home soon. We should get going,' she reminded the gentleman, who seemed blissfully lost in his own thoughts, tapping his cane on the stone pavement, a step at a time, in rhythm to a tune that he was softly humming.

'Hmm?' he said, unmindfully. 'Oh yes, my dear, yes, of course. Let's get going.'

As they turned around to retrace their steps to the starting point, from the corner of her eyes Madhu spotted someone, much further ahead, that she thought looked familiar. It was an Englishman, dressed in officers' clothing and at first Madhu was thrilled when she realized that it was Captain

Albright. What could he be doing there she wondered, quickening her pace towards him, as a giddy smile lit her face. He was standing several yards away from them, tapping his left foot impatiently as if waiting for something important. He couldn't see them for he was facing sideways and only a loud noise or some other distraction would have prompted him to turn around and spot her. Madhu's first impulse was to go over and speak to him. But she was still a distance away from him when someone else approached him—an Indian, walking briskly, covered in a brown shawl. Every muscle in Madhu tightened as she recognized the person immediately for there was no mistaking him; the very thought of him caused her blood to stir nauseously, and she could almost feel that sharp pain on her wrist where his grip had tightly held her. It was Bidyut. Cautiously, Madhu ceased walking in that direction, quickly turning towards the river, pretending to stare out into the water. She stared blankly ahead but all the while, from the corner of her eye, kept a furtive watch on what was going on to her right.

The officer shook hands with Bidyut and the two were now speaking. Their backs were completely turned towards Madhu and their heads were lowered. Bidyut reached beneath his shawl, and taking out what looked like an envelope, handed it over to the Englishman who quickly stuffed it into his inside breast pocket. He then looked around nervously but still didn't see them. They shook hands again and Captain Albright walked off, in long, quick strides,

towards the south, where the promenade ended and a row of horse carriages were waiting. Bidyut waited till the Captain was completely out of sight, then turning around he went back the same way as he had come.

All this took place in just under ten minutes, rather a short time for a friendly meeting. Of course, it was completely possible that Bidyut, who now managed most of the zamindar's affairs, had some genuine work with the Captain but somehow, something just didn't seem right to Madhu—perhaps it was because she instinctively distrusted Bidyut. Madhu couldn't explain it to herself but she felt uneasy, as if they were being watched. Feeling nervous, she tapped Mr Majumdar on his hand. 'I'm feeling tired, can we take a carriage home?' she said.

Mr Majumdar hailed an empty horse carriage and they set off back to Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road. Madhu's heart beat uneasily during the entire ride but she wasn't sure why. There was something fishy about seeing both Bidyut and Harry there, at the promenade. Why would Bidyut be meeting and handing an officer documents way out on the river bank? If it was really an official matter, wouldn't they be meeting at the official headquarters? Besides, they both looked guilty, as if they were doing something wrong, looking around as if they did not want to be seen by anybody.

When Chandan returned home, she still didn't mention any of it to him, not wanting to unnecessarily worry her father for perhaps she was just conjuring

up something ridiculous in her mind that didn't even exist. Yet, she felt she couldn't rest till she got to the bottom of it and not knowing what to do, she decided, against all better judgement, to write a letter to Som, explaining all that had happened. Despite everything that had happened, or rather, not happened between them, she trusted him implicitly. Besides, who else could she turn to? After dinner, she went to her father's writing desk for some paper and locking herself in the bedroom, sat down to compose a letter:

Som,

Before you jump to any conclusions, let me be completely candid. I am writing this letter because I need help and in this situation I wasn't sure who else to trust. Two days ago, I had a visitor in the house. It was Bidyut. He had come specifically to see me and was angry that I hadn't yet committed to marrying him. He made some demands and threatened me. But that is another story and I don't want to bore you with the details of my personal life.

The reason I'm even mentioning this to you is because yesterday, while I was out on a walk with Mr Majumdar by the Strand promenade, I saw him again, talking to Captain Albright whom I'm sure you remember from the races: the officer who had ridden Queenie, the horse that had won. I'm not sure what was going on or if this is even a cause for concern, but there

was something odd about that meeting—to be meeting so far away, all the way by the river, just for a few brief minutes and then exchanging something.

Either I'm overreacting to something very routine, in which case you can completely disregard this letter, or this piece of information may be of value to you. I remember you had once told me, that evening at Lord Curzon's speech in Presidency College, that you didn't trust Bidyut. Well, there was something about yesterday's incident that didn't seem right and I'm not sure what, if anything at all, all this could mean but I thought it was something you should know. I just wanted you to be aware of things and I hope that in writing this letter to you I have not overstepped my boundaries or acted imprudently.

Yours,
Madhu

She folded the letter twice and sealed it in an envelope. The next day, she took Hari with her as she waited inside the carriage, parked by the gates of Presidency College all morning, just to catch sight of him. She felt unsafe handing the note to Hari, just in case it fell into the wrong hands. Finally, by midday, she saw Som's white-kurta-clad figure; he seemed rushed, walking briskly down the red gravelled path that led out of the campus gates. She thought sadly that the Som she'd met back at home was much

different from the person he had become in Calcutta. Here, he looked anxious, tired, worried. His eyes looked hollow, dark circles hanging like foreboding clouds in his face.

She called out to him and at first, hearing his name, he couldn't tell where the voice was coming from. Madhu briefly poked her head out of the carriage and catching a glimpse, he barely recognized her as she had the end of her sari covering her head. He was shocked to hear a woman's voice call out his name in the middle of the street and even more astonished to look up and see Madhu. Was there no end to her childishness, her erratic behaviour? Did she not realize how improper it would be if she was seen by someone, waiting out by the gates, stalking him? What if her own father had walked by? And yet, he couldn't help but be amused at her boldness, her single-mindedness, completely unaware of gossip as she risked reputation and scandal in a style that was typically Madhu.

'This is for you,' she said in a hushed tone, handing him the letter, and pulled herself back inside the carriage. Her heart was pounding violently since the moment she had seen him walk through the metal gates. It was not a busy time of the day and there weren't many other students about—mostly people on the streets going about their own business in their usual way, completely unaware of the two had-been lovers, hesitantly and awkwardly facing each other. It was agony to be so near him and not be in his arms. She realized that there could never be any other man

who would be able to replace Som in her heart. She knew that now, ever since her last encounter with Harry; she knew it with more certainity than she'd ever known before. But the realization was double-ledged—the elation of recognizing true love and the feeling of overwhelming, undying passion, but on the other side, the sorrow of knowing it would always remain unfulfilled.

Puzzled, Som watched the carriage leave as it shuffled through the busy streets and disappeared into the horizon. When it finally became less than a minuscule dot in the crowds, he looked down at what Madhu had shoved in his hands. Tearing open the envelope, he read through the letter, once and then again.

Som had known that Bidyut was in Calcutta although he had no idea that he'd made a special appearance for Madhu. Not only that, Chandan-babu had even gone as far as to invite Bidyut into their secret society, which was now meeting at Mr Majumdar's house. Som was outraged as he read of Bidyut's visit to Madhu. If he knew her at all, he knew there was more than what she'd mentioned in the letter; that she was still not disclosing some of the details and he swore silently to himself. Moreover, as he read on, he grimaced at the thought of Bidyut meeting secretively with Harry, whom he knew very well to be the second-in-command to the Viceroy, Lord Curzon. Something didn't seem right. Madhu's suspicions were justified even though she had no idea that Bidyut was an active member of the society. Was

Bidyut trying to double cross them and put them all in grave danger? But Bidyut had now become an important administrator in his father's estates and had also gained a group of close and faithful followers and some clout in the Bardhaman vicinity. Whatever Som did, he would have to do carefully and although his first instinct was to drag Bidyut out and punch him as hard as he could across his face, hopefully knocking out a few teeth, sensibility advised him to wait, to be patient; the only practical way to expose him for the low-life criminal that he'd always suspected him to be was to catch him in person.

Several days had passed since Madhu had written Som the note and still there had been no news from him. Madhu grew increasingly worried and she wondered if she'd done the wrong thing by confiding in him. She paced up and down her room half concerned about Som, half worried that Bidyut would once again storm in and grab her, and half decided that perhaps it was time to say something to her father after all. She had barely slept the past few days and even when she did, terrible nightmares would make her sit up in bed and break out into a cold sweat.

Bini too had returned to Mani House. On her last evening in the city, she had come to visit Madhu, to say goodbye. 'Uncle is going to stay back here, but he wants me to go back. He thinks it's getting too unsafe for me here. Dr Bose from the college will be escorting me home since he is travelling through Bardhaman on his way home.'

'Dr Bose?' said Madhu, unable to suppress her

smile. 'Be careful, I hear he has quite a reputation when it comes to women.'

Bini laughed heartily. 'Don't be ridiculous, I'm not such an easy prey and besides, I'm not on the market.'

'Well, I hear that he is,' Madhu smirked.

'You must come and visit me soon,' Bini said more seriously, looking fondly at her. 'Before the Puja this year, promise me?'

Madhu was sad to lose her company. She had grown accustomed to Bini over the weeks in Calcutta. But, it was almost time for her father to leave as well. Their three months as planned in the city had turned into four; winter had turned into summer and time had passed by like fast moving clouds on a windy day. So much had happened since she had first arrived, yet it seemed as if it were just yesterday that she had first set foot in No. 10, Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road. In four short months, it had become home and she would be really sad to leave.

But more than the marble floors, with their chequered pattern, more than her bedroom and the grand four-poster bed, more than the streets of the city, the markets, the energy and the people, leaving Calcutta would mean once more creating a distance between Som and herself. Each time they met and parted, the farewell seemed more and more final and she couldn't imagine ever seeing him again. And it wasn't only the physical distance between them that concerned her. Som was already so different from what she knew him to be—so cold, so driven, so unmoved by anything that wasn't part of his nationalistic

movement, that she feared that when they next met, whenever that might be, he would be someone else altogether and she may never recognize him again. She had already lost the chance of having him in her life but leaving Calcutta now would make it more definite, more final—and he'd become just a shadow lurking in the dark corners of her memory.

Almost two weeks had passed now and still, silence was the only response to her letter. Madhu had almost given up when Chandan came home from college one evening at his usual time but, instead of going straight into his room to freshen up, as he normally did, he called Madhu from downstairs. 'Madhu, Madhu, you have to hear this, I have some news for you. You won't believe what's happened,' he said in an excited tone, as Madhu heard his feet clamber up the stairs.

Madhu rushed out of her room immediately because she knew deep down in her gut that it had something to do with Som. Chandan, now breathless from having climbed up too fast, gasped, 'Our dear Bidyut, the boy that I have watched grow up before my very own eyes, the boy that I foolishly wanted to hand you over to—turns out that all this time he has been a traitor. I, out of sheer blindness, trusted him and made him a member of our society and this is how he has repaid me!' he said.

'A member of your society?' exclaimed Madhu, now even more shocked that all this time her father had known of Bidyut's arrival in Calcutta and not only that, had opened his doors for him.

'Yes, my dear, I didn't say anything to you but he has been in Calcutta for quite some time now and he had been pressuring me about the wedding. I thought the society would preoccupy him, because after all, we needed more help as our work grew. But it turns out the English now want to crush every single secret society, every single voice of dissent. We have been officially blacklisted by the government and I wouldn't be surprised if the government resorts to arresting the members or harassing them. Can you believe that?'

'Oh my God! What does that mean?' stammered Madhu.

'That means we have to break up our meetings, for now at least, although Som refuses to do so. The boy has to stop now; he is in real danger,' sighed Chandan.

'Oh?' enquired Madhu.

'Yes, you see my dear, it was he who found out about Bidyut. Apparently that scum had been secretly meeting with an English officer named Harry Albright, who is a good friend of Mr Roy's. In exchange for money, Bidyut had been handing over all our literature, our journals and even the schedule of our meetings. But now the British know about our secret society. They can crack down on us any time.'

'How did Som find out?' asked Madhu, feeling a hammer inside her head, although she dreaded the answer, dreaded the thought of any harm coming to Som, for if anything did happen to him, she would be the one at fault. But she knew she couldn't avoid the truth any longer and she firmed herself for the answer.

'That part, I'm not completely sure about. But Som, acting on a tip, caught Bidyut at the promenade, on his way to hand over some information, and apprehended him. Some blows were exchanged,' said Chandan, now punching the invisible air with his hands in a comical manner, 'and our dear Som beat that vermin into a pulp.'

'What?' cried Madhu, aghast.

'Oh yes!' cried Chandan, 'I wasn't there, but Mr Majumdar told me it was epic stuff. Only something you would read in a novel. I only wish I was there to have witnessed it. My dear, I have to personally apologize to you for forcing you on such a creature, on a two-faced snake. Who would have thought Dwijendra's son, his own flesh and blood, could turn out to be such a low-life? I'm ashamed to even think that I even considered him to be a worthy son-in-law. I'm sorry to have to be the one to say anything to his father at all. I have made wrong judgements, Madhu, my child, I've been mistaken. I hope you can forgive me.'

'Of course I forgive you! What kind of a question is that? It wasn't your fault. How would you have known? But, tell me, Father, is Som all right? What's happened to him?'

'Oh he's fine, he's just got a few bruises here and there. But he refuses to shut down the operations of the society although I've told him to take some time off and go back to Panchkula. I think things are getting much too intense for him over here and I would feel personally responsible if anything should happen to

him. What sort of an education would I have given a boy if he continued with this madness? To conduct any activities against the government now, at this crucial stage when the partition is so near, is just stupidity and he has to know that. Yet he's bullishly defiant and refuses to budge and is now talking of protests. My society was more a non-violent, literary society. But Som has a new surge of anger and I'm afraid he'll take things to a completely different level. I've even written to the zamindar-babu and explained the entire situation; everything, from the society meetings to Bidyut. I think it's time he knew all that his son has been up to.'

'You think Som will return if his father asks him to?' wondered Madhu aloud.

'Who knows,' sighed Chandan. 'That boy has a very strong will. I'm not sure there's anyone who can stop him.'

Madhu knew then that she had to go see him, even though seeing her would probably antagonize him even further. She knew she had to give it one last try. Now that Bidyut had been exposed, she felt the need to let Som know that she had had no intentions of marrying Bidyut; that she had lied to him all along. She had to explain, to let him know why she hadn't disclosed the truth to him in the first place. If only he would understand. If only he knew that she lied for his sake, not her own. If only he knew that it was him, and only him, who would ever matter to her. She had to tell him, just one last time, had to come out clean so that no matter what

happened in the future, at least he would know the truth. He had trusted her, trusted what she'd written in the letter enough to risk his own life. She owed him that much at least.

CHAPTER EIGHT

OVER THE WEEKS, MADHU looked all over for Som. Every time she had an excuse to be out on the streets, near the college, or near government offices, newspaper bureaus, or a group of students congregated at the corner of a crossing, her eyes would search for Som. She would look for him in the narrow bylanes or on the avenues and every white-kurta-clad figure that would walk by, would make her sit upright on her seat. If there was a riot at Hastings, she thought of him; if there was a procession on Chowringhee, she thought of him; every blossom that fell from a tree reminded her of him; every wrought-iron gate leading into a mansion, every new moon, every star that twinkled alone in the unbound sky—he was always there, always lurking around the corner, but would never quite appear before her. He'd become a habit that she couldn't let go of.

Finally, Madhu couldn't sit and wait any longer. She had to take things in her own hands and go see him. Without mentioning anything to her father, she set out, not to the college where she usually went to catch a glimpse of him, but to Som's palatial home in Shyambazar.

Madhu was nervous as she set foot inside the enormous courtyard of Mallick Bari. It was by no means the size of Mani House in Panchkula but by city standards, it was the grandest she had seen. The limestone exterior was pink and long columns held wide arches all along the length of the courtyard. At first, Madhu just stood there, feeling helpless, gaping, staring up and all around. There was pin-drop silence; the corridors were dark, the staircases stood still, completely devoid of any signs of life. The trees and potted plants were just barely alive, clinging on to their leaves in the barren, cracked courtyard; even birds, scared to step foot in there, flew around in circles above, keeping a safe distance. The gaiety and effervescence was all but lost within the gloom and pallid atmosphere of Mallick Bari. The deserted hallways echoed in silence; the high arches seemed to merge into a blackened ceiling, there was not a person in sight; it was a ghost-house, with only memories floating about in the air like dead spirits, as if already mourning the loss of a dear life.

'Som's gone, if that's why you're here,' said a voice and Madhu looked all around and then up to see none other than the zamindar, standing at the edge of the second-floor balcony, looking down at her with a solemn face. Unable to say anything, she remained speechless, staring up at him, suddenly unsure of why she had come in the first place. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared over the balcony's edge, he disappeared again, just like that. Hearing footsteps behind her, she spun around to see Gopaldas enter the courtyard, walking

towards her, his stately figure, clad in silk, standing threateningly before her, making her shiver inside.

'Your father had written to me, telling me about everything that has happened—all the meetings, the secret society, about Bidyut who, I have found out, has also been embezzling me. I had trusted him, unquestioningly. Now, I realize it's impossible to trust anyone who isn't family, because at the end of the day, each man is on his own. At times like this, I often wonder what will become of my zamindari, which I have worked so hard for, once I am gone. Satya is much too good natured and complacent. Som has no interest in it whatsoever. I have sent Bini back and stayed on a little longer in the city only to try and convince him to return with me. But of course he won't have anything to do with Panchkula any more. And to make matters worse, he's now gone.'

Even Madhu had been too trusting. She had believed in Harry, naively thinking that all the attention he had showered on her had been genuine; that he was truly besotted by her. But now she realized that she was just a pawn in the game; a well-masterminded scheme. The walks at the racecourse, the conversation at Lord Curzon's speech—he had known all along who she was and had intentionally tried to use her to get access to her father and the goings-on of the secret society. Yet, even though she felt betrayed and used, all she could think of right now was Som and his safety.

'Where's he gone?' stammered Madhu.

'To the Government House. Some of the students from the college have organized a protest. I implored

him not to go, but of course, he wouldn't listen. Som told me about Bidyut. He told me it was you who first warned him,' the zamindar's voice trailed off. 'I owe you for that. If it was not for you, Bidyut would have continued cheating me. I'm so sorry Madhu. '

'Please, you don't have to...' implored Madhu.

'No, please let me finish, let me unburden my heart today. Som was always right about you, you know. It's true that I didn't want him to marry you but you must understand, I wasn't against you, personally. I was against what you stood for. I was against the breaking of tradition. It just wasn't appropriate, I hope you understand that,' his voice now softening as he spoke. Madhu nodded, stupefied, letting Gopaldas speak on.

'But I can see now why Som was so adamant. Why he loves you so much. I can see now why he refuses to have any other bride. Madhu, someone like you comes along once in a rare while—a unique combination of beauty and intelligence: a perfect wife for a zamindar, and I realize now that Som recognized this in you much before anybody else,' and he smiled, making Madhu almost want to cry. There was a surge of emotion that she had accumulated over the past months and now it swirled in her gut like an enraged fire, threatening to overflow. But she stood resilient.

'Frankly, I don't see him with anyone else either. I would be proud to have you as a member of our family. I respect his nationalistic feelings and passion for his people. It is not easy, you know, forsaking a life of luxury and embracing hardships for one's beliefs. But I also feel that there are other ways to

serve your country. What he's gone to do today is far too dangerous. I wish he would've listened to me. But, you must know, that if there's anyone, anyone at all that he'd listen to, it would be you.'

'Me?' asked Madhu as a drop of tear trickled down her cheek.

'Yes, my child you, only you. Only you can stop him now...'

'I'm going to try and stop him, Gopal-babu, I need to put an end to this madness before he gets hurt,' cried Madhu. She wasn't afraid any more—not of Gopaldas, not of her father, not of Bidyut, not of death and not of the love that she felt for just one man, and one man only—her Som. And she had to stop him before she lost him forever. She turned around and ran out of the door and hailed the first carriage she saw. As she scrambled in, tucking in the end of her sari, she yelled at the driver, 'To the Government House, Dalhousie Square, as fast as you can go!' The driver stood mystified at first, unsure if he should be carrying a single lady all alone through the city. But Madhu was adamant.

'I'm giving you an order, go! I'll give you all the money I have. Just take me there,' she said, scrambling to reach for her pouch. The world seemed to whizz by her at a dizzying speed through the window as Madhu looked fixedly ahead, without daring to blink.

Dalhousie Square was the heart of all government activity, housing many official administrative offices including the Writers' Building. Madhu wasn't surprised to learn that was where Som was headed. Named after

Governor-General Lord Dalhousie, the square was built around the Lal Dighi Tank in central Calcutta, close to its commercial headquarters. Madhu's carriage approached the southern end of the tank, where the Government House, residence of the Viceroy, was located and she had to crane her neck upwards, to view the massive three-storeyed structure in its entirety.

Madhu's carriage slowed down it approached the palace, where crowds of people had begun to congregate, just outside, with police dressed in khaki standing offside, hands ready on their sticks, waiting for the moment to be given the order to charge. Madhu strained her eyes to see if she could find the man she had come looking for, who, along with the rest of the students from Presidency College, would soon be starting his own war in the witness of the tall, looming archway that led into the palatial grounds. She had to catch him before he walked through them, thought Madhu. For once he crossed over to the other side, he'd be as good as gone forever.

The carriage had barely come to a complete halt before she practically leapt out of it. The driver yelled out to her, 'Watch out, lady!' as she ran towards the swarm of men. Much to her agitation she soon realized that most of them were wearing white and every one of them looked like Som—a hundred Soms, all marching towards certain doom.

Jostled by the frenzied crowd, she could barely see anything, and could only hear the loud chants of 'Vande Mataram'. A sea of bodies that was previously dispersed across the square was now coming together

in a tightly knit mass, raising its arms in protest and with each passing minute, the voices seemed to grow louder, stronger, bolder, angrier. In sheer panic, she ran forward blindly, not quite knowing where she was headed. She bumped into people, was pushed and shoved from left to right, and held on tightly to the end of her sari so that it wouldn't slip down her shoulder. 'Som!' she screamed out frantically but her voice was drowned out, spiralling through the crazed streets, bouncing ineffectually from one body to another, before eventually trailing off into a whisper. 'Som! Where are you?' she tried again, and yet again, her voice was swallowed by the madness, like that of a lost child's.

The din around her seemed to grow louder and louder, and the chants assumed an organized rhythm, as the strikers huddled even closer together to form a human shield. Suddenly through it all, one single voice screamed, 'ATTACK!' Madhu turned towards the voice and there he was: Som, at the head of the group, leading the march. For a moment Madhu was captivated by what she saw: Som's hair was pulled back and glistened with sweat; his broad shoulders were defiant; his strong chest pushed and drove the protesters forward; his face shone with boundless passion and fearless resolve. But before Madhu could even register what that might mean, there was a vast unified roar—beginning in a low gurgle and rising to a crescendo and within a split second there was utter chaos. People were running, pushing, jumping, throwing. Suddenly, she spotted a policeman pointing his rifle directly at Som. Madhu, petrified, shrieked

out Som's name in a last-ditch attempt to save him.

'Madhu!' someone shouted back through the hysteria and she barely had the courage to look up to see Som ducking the bullets and running towards her. He had a dark shawl draped over his shoulders and his eyes looked panic-stricken as he ran to her. Even though he couldn't have been more than twenty feet away, it seemed an immense struggle to brush past all the protesters to get to where she stood, scared, fragile, and possibly the only woman in that seething mob. Even though it was he who had taken the main initiative for what he had intended as a peaceful demonstration, it had somehow slipped beyond his control and had turned into this monstrous, uncontrollable revolt. It all seemed completely ridiculous now. Everything had made so much sense to him even a few minutes ago, but now, seeing Madhu helpless, vulnerable, and utterly at the mercy of the angry mob, he couldn't even remember what strong motives could have possibly dragged him into this mess.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, he managed to reach her and embraced her tightly, shielding her from the mayhem. 'Are you insane? What are you doing here?' he said, breathing heavily, pulling her into him as she ducked her head into his arms for cover. His hair was in disarray and his shawl was half falling off his shoulders as little pearls of sweat formed on a forehead that was wrinkled with worry. Som pulled her into a narrow alleyway that led off from the main square. There, in the quiet shelter of the alleyway, undisturbed and unnoticed by

the protesters who ran by, he gathered her into his arms. Madhu was so glad to have finally found him, she gasped and hugged him back tightly, clutching on to him with all her might, unwilling to let go. Without thinking, he kissed the top of her head, then, holding her face with both his hands, took a long, hard look at her, to make sure it was really his Madhu and that he wasn't dreaming. Madhu looked up at him uncertainly, biting the corner of her lip. He mumbled her name under his breath, stroking her hair, her cheeks, her face, each clinging to the other as if an external force was going to pull them apart if they let go.

'What are you doing here?' he asked, still unable to believe that she was there.

'I went to look for you at Mallick Bari. Your father told me you were here. I came to call you back.'

'You risked your own life to come out looking for me?' he said, astounded.

'My life would be worth nothing if something happened to you, Som.'

'That's not what you said a few months ago,' he said, half astonished at her sudden change of mind.

'I said a lot of things back then because I believed that I would always have been in your way, always preventing you from doing your duty. I thought that I was doing you a favour by staying away. When I was at Mani House, on that last day, I had overheard a conversation between your father and you: about Shyamali, and what a good alliance she would be. After hearing that, how could I come between you and your destiny?'

'That's not my destiny, Madhu,' said Som, kissing her lightly on the forehead. 'Maybe I too didn't know things as clearly as I do now. But I've always known that my life was not there, in Panchkula. It took me a long time to make my father see that.'

'And this is your destiny? Here? Gambling away your life?'

'After you rejected me, my life held no value for me and what better use of it than as a pawn for a good cause?' asked Som.

It was true—in many ways he had indeed been directionless and it was only the memory of Madhu that had kept him going. In his love for her, he had found a strength that had given him the courage to stand up to his father, to let him know that he could never marry for the sake of a political alliance and that he could never inherit the role of zamindar. Madhu gave him the courage to confront what he truly wanted. And when she rejected him, he had lost his one true love. Despondent as he was, he threw himself into the secret society, spent endless days and nights working on manifestos and publications to propagate their cause to fellow students and citizens of Calcutta. The society, which had started with just a handful of members, now boasted over fifty, scattered through the city. How could he not be proud of what he'd achieved? But none of this would have been possible had he not been jilted by Madhu.

And as he now stood with her in his arms, as the breath escaping from her parted lips warmed his upper chest, where her head rested, just above his beating

heart, he couldn't help thinking that everything that had happened, had happened for a reason. If Madhu had been his, right from the beginning, then he would have never come to Calcutta and all the work he'd accomplished would have remained unrealized. Had he not met her in the first place, perhaps he would have been easily persuaded to marry Narendranath's daughter and live a complacent but dissatisfied life. At least he couldn't regret any of the choices he'd made, which was something he may have done if he had conformed to and lived the life that had been predetermined for him.

'Tell me something, Som,' said Madhu, 'How did you go about exposing Bidyut? When my father told me about your confrontation, I was beside myself with worry.'

'I had told Chandan-babu all along not to bring Bidyut into our meetings, that he couldn't be trusted. After I received your letter, I had no doubts in my mind that he was up to something. So I began following him. Nothing happened at first but I never doubted what you had seen which had made my hunch even stronger. Finally, almost a week later, I followed him to the Strand, by the banks of the Hooghly, just where you'd spotted him the first time. That time, Captain Albright was with two other officers so I didn't dare confront them. I still couldn't tell anyone else about it but I kept my eye on him. One day, during one of our meetings, Chandan-babu had given him the outline for a manifesto that we were going to publish. He was to safeguard it till the

next meeting. I wanted to prevent him from giving Bidyut such a responsibility but with so many people around, I couldn't say anything. That evening, after the meeting had ended, I followed Bidyut directly to the ghats but before he could reach the promenade, I came out of hiding and confronted him. He behaved as if I was mad, saying that I had a vivid imagination, vehemently denying everything. I asked him to hand me the papers, which he refused to do. I asked him again, and this time he warned me to back off. It wasn't my ego that was threatened by him, but at that moment, I felt suddenly nauseated at the thought of you marrying this despicable, debased, contemptible man and I just couldn't control myself. I was overcome with jealousy and anger and I struck him as hard as I could. The coward spared no time in handing the plans to me. I wished with all my heart that I could take legal action against him but of course, in such a situation, I couldn't really do much other than to make sure that he'd keep away from you as well as my family if he knew what was good for him.'

'I never thought you to be a jealous, violent sort of man,' said Madhu, amazed to discover a side of Som which she had never seen before.

'You've aroused a lot of feelings in me that I didn't know I possessed,' said Som, looking into her face.

'After all of this, what I uncovered was perhaps even worse,' Som continued. 'I went back to Panchkula and went through every single book that Bidyut maintained for my father—every minuscule piece of paper; I spared no detail. Not only was he a

traitor to Chandan-babu, he had also been stealing tax money from the farmers. He had convinced my father to give the farmers abatement for the year, since the monsoons had been weak and the yield had been poor. My father thought he was actually doing a good service. But on the other hand, he had told the farmers that the zamindar had ordered the taxes to be doubled because of budget problems and he was collecting the difference. Those poor farmers were practically penniless after paying off their dues and Bidyut went so far as to seize their land if they defaulted on their payments for more than a month. It took a lot of investigation for me to uncover the truth but once I did, at least I had the grounds for legitimate action against him.'

'What did you do?' asked Madhu.

'I spoke to the district magistrate. Rest assured we will never have to see that low-life again,' said Som. 'And to think that you almost married him.'

Madhu smiled up at him. 'I never had any intentions of marrying him. I had already told my father that, long before we had even come to Calcutta. I think in some ways, we both hoped that in due course, I may see things in a different light, but with each day that I was in Calcutta, and with each time that I saw you, I grew more certain that I couldn't be with another man.'

'That's not what you had told me, remember?'

'I know,' Madhu admitted. 'I thought it was better that you not know I'd become available,' she said, grinning. 'Besides, I was still under the impression

that there was something between you and Shyamali. She was always with you at every function. Anyone who saw the two of you together would have thought that you two were a pair.'

'You were threatened by her? Madhu, you've got to believe me when I say I've had no interest in her whatsoever.'

They stood there for what seemed like an eternity before Som finally said, 'We can't remain here, I have to get you out of this place,' leading her by the hand, pulling her away from the eye of the storm. 'Follow me, hurry Madhu,' he said as they tried making their way through the mobs. But before Madhu could see it, something hit her on the side of her head. She felt a searing pain in her temple, and suddenly darkness engulfed her.

As Som saw Madhu crumple on to the street, his universe came crashing down. 'Madhu!' he screamed, gathering her in his arms, and without so much as pausing to check her breathing, or to look at her face, he carried her as fast as he could, away from the mobs, and to a back street, behind the centre of the square. Hailing a carriage, he ordered it to take them to No. 10, Raja Nabakrishna Deb Road, his voice audibly desperate. In the carriage, with nowhere else to look, he finally summoned the courage to look upon her—her eyes were shut, but she was still breathing. She seemed to be in such a peaceful, deep sleep that he felt a wave of tenderness for her. Her red lips, which usually uttered a hundred words per minute were now shut tight, her skin warm, still

pulsated gently; and as his hands examined her skull, Som was relieved to find that there was no blood, no severe, visible injury. Hopefully no permanent harm had been done. 'Faster,' he urged the driver, anxious to get her home.

When Madhu opened her eyes, a blur of bright light flooded through and she instantly squeezed them shut again, unable to face it, the darkness infinitely more comforting. From a distance, she heard her name being called out and glimpses of the riot flashed before her. Hesitantly, she tried opening her eyes again, and this time, very slowly, the room around her swam into focus and finally began making sense. Her head stirred as if in deep sleep and when she turned to her left and saw Som's blurry face, she stared at his image in disbelief, thinking it was just a dream.

His warm hand covered hers and she gripped it for comfort. 'You had us all so scared,' he said, looking worried. Madhu only managed to smile faintly.

'How long have I been here?' wondered Madhu, aloud.

'Oh about twelve hours,' he said, stroking her hand.

Madhu tried to sit up but Som wouldn't let her. 'The doctor wants you to get plenty of rest. You don't have any physical injury, luckily, but that blow caused a significant amount of trauma. Just take it easy for tonight.'

Madhu was too exhausted to protest as her eyelids fluttered and struggled to stay open and then once

again, Som's face blurred and then vanished.

The next morning things were a lot easier and Madhu felt considerably better. When she woke up, she was all alone in the room, just as every normal morning. She slowly raised herself off the bed, looking around her, half worried that she had just had a long, intense dream which she'd almost believed to be real. Yet, her head pounded lightly—a gentle reminder that something had indeed happened the day before. When she exited the room, her father was taking his morning tea.

'Aah, there is my damsel,' he mused, seeing her enter the room. 'How are you feeling? You gave us all quite a scare yesterday.'

Madhu laughed lightly. 'I feel great, as if nothing had even happened. I'll be okay, I promise.'

Chandan took his daughter's hands in his and patted them, looking straight into her eyes and smirking. 'Oh, I'm sure you will, I'm sure you will.'

'What does that mean?' she said, frowning up at him. The mischievous look on his face was of one when he would play a joke on her as a child, or poke fun at her; a look she hadn't seen in years.

'Oh nothing,' he chuckled. 'But now that you're feeling perfectly all right, I think I'll be going to teach today. You will be fine by yourself, won't you?'

'Of course,' said Madhu, irritably.

'Good, then I suppose I will see you in the evening. And please, Madhu, try not to go off and join any more riots while I'm gone. Do you think you can manage that?' teased Chandan, as he walked away.

It was a dull, cloudy, listless day and still feeling a bit dazed and slightly confused as to what had happened at the protest, Madhu flopped on to her bed, tracking the story back in her head. No, it hadn't been a dream, Som was there, he had held her, he had told her in so many words that he couldn't live without her. It really had happened. But where was he? Why had her father not mentioned anything about Som that morning? She vaguely remembered seeing him in her room last evening but since everything was still obscure in her memory, she couldn't quite piece it all together.

Her heart thudded happily when she thought about Som holding her in the alleyway and the conversation they'd had. Just before early evening, there was a knock on her door. 'Come in,' she called out, wondering what Hari wanted. But it wasn't Hari's face that peered through the door which slowly inched open. It was Som's.

She sat up, completely alert now and slightly embarrassed that she was in such a dishevelled state. But it was too late, he'd already seen her and there was no point in trying to even straighten her hair, because that would make her seem even more self-conscious. She didn't know what to say as he silently entered the room, then walked around the bed to where she sat.

'Don't get up,' he said softly as she tried to scramble to her feet, now standing right beside her and taking a seat on the bed.

He took her hands in his, their fingers melding

into one, the warmth of his palms spread over her body as he looked deeply into her eyes. 'Madhubati, I've lost you once, I don't want to lose you again,' he said and, all she could do was just stare blankly at him, speech having completely failed her. She squeezed his hands tightly, hoping that was a good enough sign to let him know that she could never let him go either. And it seemed to work, for the next thing she knew, she was enveloped into a strong embrace and all she could feel was the moistness of his lips on her skin—on her cheeks, her eyelids, the corner of her chin, till they finally rested on her lips, encompassing her mouth in all its tenderness. She was acutely aware of his pulsating chest, pounding beneath hers as she surrendered completely to him, without any protests, her arms entwining themselves around his neck and her head, tilting up at him, begging to be kissed and held.

Som weaved his fingers through her loose, open hair, moving aside the stray strands that fell over her face. He cupped her head in his hands and examined her longingly. 'I could never tire looking at this face for the rest of my life,' he murmured, stroking the contours of her face.

'I was here till late last night, you know,' he said softly, 'talking with your father.'

'Oh!' Madhu managed to mumble, nervously.

'He's given us both his blessings,' Som continued, his eyes never leaving hers for a split second as if searching for an answer. When Madhu, still unable to utter a sound in shock, just stared up at him, almost

melting in the intensity of his look, he laughed softly. 'Is that a "yes" I see in your eyes?' he asked hopefully and Madhu just about managed to nod shyly as she looked away and wrapped her arms around him to hold him tightly.

They stayed like that for minutes and at last, he peeled her arms away from his neck, pulling himself away from her slightly as he once again claimed her lips, and this time, she parted her mouth, inviting him to explore even deeper within. His hands slipped down the delicate lines of her neck, over her arms and when they curled around her waist, against the skin exposed through her half-unravelling sari, a soft sound escaped from her throat. He pulled her close to him so that there was not even an inch of space between the two heated bodies and his tongue probed her mouth in hunger. 'Are you sure you're ready for this?' he asked.

'I'm fine,' she said, impatiently, pulling his head back over hers.

Somehow, one by one, each of her blouse buttons came undone and the next thing she knew, the warmth of his mouth covered her breasts. Madhu arched her back moaning in pleasure, as she felt his tongue circle the tips of her nipples. Som's hand trailed her stomach and tugged gently at the sari, which came undone in one pull. She didn't care any more, she was tired of waiting. She felt his fingers trace up her ankles, her thighs, all the way up into the very root of the deep throbbing which crept over her. 'Oh, Som!' she cried out. Her fingers fumbled with his kurta buttons,

somehow managing to get it over his head and she greedily dug her palms into his soft, naked skin and wrapped her legs around his.

He had waited so long for this, to possess her completely, he just couldn't get enough. His mouth found hers again and their tongue wrapped around each other. His hand explored the warmth of her femininity till he made her cry out his name over and over again.

'Darling,' he muttered into her, 'you're finally mine.'

Madhu looked up dreamily at him. Her hands explored his naked body, pulling him tighter over her, feeling his hardness. This is what ecstasy must feel like, she thought.

For that brief moment, she completely let go, not caring if Hari may walk in through the doors; not caring how inappropriate it may appear; she had held herself back for so long but somehow now, with everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, it all seemed more legitimate. He was hers and everything in that moment belonged to them; everything felt right. She was no longer ashamed, no longer afraid to give in to her desires. For finally, Som had had the courage to make his own choices. He was no longer just an aimless shadow, rambling along anywhere the wind blew, but he was his own master now—he knew where he wanted to go and what he wanted from life. He wanted her—Madhu, and she was proud to be a part of his life.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Jasmine Saigal was born and raised in Kolkata. As a dreamy teenager she went to a convent boarding school in Darjeeling where there were strict rules against reading romance novels. So Jasmine became a closet romantic, hiding the photo-romances under her pillow, reading under flashlights late into the night till she fell asleep, dreaming of her charming Mr Darcy. After school, she followed her passion into literature by studying creative writing in New York. Jasmine now lives happily with her two first loves—dog Toto and cat Felix. This is Jasmine's first romance novel and she finally feels liberated from her convent upbringing and in openly displaying her tender, affectionate side.

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